ABSTRACT

FLEDER, SARAH DEES. Professional School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies. (Under the direction of Dr. Stanley Baker.)

The purpose of the present study was to examine how effective school counselor advocates developed the advocacy competencies necessary for successful advocacy for students and their families. A multiple case study, descriptive qualitative research design was used to investigate the circumstances and methods through which the participants developed advocacy competencies. Semi-structured interviews and collection of resume documents explored the phenomenological experiences of three exemplary school counselor advocates with developing advocacy competencies. All participants were current or former recipients of the North Carolina School Counselor Association’s (NCSCA) School Counselor of the Year Award. The award criteria aligned closely with advocacy behaviors identified in the research literature. Thus, advocacy was an underlying criterion for the award and characteristic of award recipients. The constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to analyze the data. Qualitative research software, Atlas.ti, was used in the analysis to code all data and group the data into emergent themes. Study participants emphasized acquiring experience, making conscious decisions, having role models and mentors, and engaging in professional development activities. The participants also stressed the importance of consulting with other counselors, engaging in self-reflection, and building relationships with students, parents, and school staff. The degree of impact a situation poses for the individual or group of students was noted as well as counselors’ awareness of the social-ecological context of students’ lives. The participants encouraged new school counselors to take small steps when starting out. According to the data,
administrators’ accurate understanding of the role of school counselors facilitated counselors’ ability to advocate for students, as did the counselors’ ability to advocate for themselves and the appropriate use of their time. Self-reflection, professional development, and internships all helped counselors develop advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Nice counselor syndrome, administrators’ misunderstanding of the counselor’s role, counselor and teacher attitudes, and rigid school policies were major hindrances to participants’ development of advocacy competencies. None of the participants cited graduate training as a source of advocacy competence. Furthermore, advocates are rarely popular. Sample selection from a population of award winning counselors, while indicative of their efficacy, may have eliminated the most outspoken advocates.
Professional School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies

by
Sarah Dees Fleder

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in School Counseling

Raleigh, North Carolina
2011

APPROVED BY:

Bonnie C. Johnson Fusarelli, Ph. D.                Edwin R. Gerler, Jr., Ed. D.

Stanley B. Baker, Ph. D.
Chair of Advisory Committee
DEDICATION

To my mother: I see more of you in myself each day and I am grateful.
BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Dees Fleder was born in Fayetteville, NC on July 15, 1981. She is the daughter of Wilbur Eugene Dees and the late Rhonda Moon Dees. Sarah earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Environmental Science and Policy from Duke University in 2004. She then spent four years teaching high school science in Cumberland County, NC before entering the Counselor Education program at North Carolina State University. Sarah is currently a high school counselor at Holly Springs High School in Holly Springs, NC. She is a member of the American School Counselor Association and the North Carolina School Counselor Association. Sarah enjoys spending time with her husband, Samuel David Fleder, their dog, Wilson, and cat, Maggie.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first thank my husband, Sam Fleder, who demonstrated tremendous patience and understanding throughout this journey. His encouragement and ability to make me laugh sustained me while his editing and formatting expertise kept me sane. I am also incredibly grateful to my father, Wilbur Dees, for his love and continued support of my academic endeavors.

I would like to acknowledge my advisory committee members for their direction and guidance: Dr. Stanley Baker, Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, and Dr. Edwin Gerler. Their belief in my academic abilities gave me the confidence to pursue this research. A special thank you goes to Dr. Baker for his support and encouragement throughout my time in the Counselor Education program.

Finally, the study participants’ willingness to share their time, experiences, and insights made this study possible. I am better prepared to advocate for my students as a result of this research, and it is my hope that this study will enable other counselors to advocate more effectively as well.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .............................................................................................................................. vii

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................1
  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................ 2
  Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................................ 4
  Definition of Key Terms .............................................................................................................. 4
  Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................................... 5

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW .............................................................................................6
  School Counseling ....................................................................................................................... 7
    Background and History ........................................................................................................... 7
    Contemporary Models .............................................................................................................. 9
      ASCA National Model .......................................................................................................... 9
      Transforming School Counseling Initiative ........................................................................ 10
  Advocacy ................................................................................................................................... 11
    Definition ............................................................................................................................... 11
    Advocacy Behaviors ............................................................................................................... 12
    Levels of Advocacy ................................................................................................................. 13
    Shifting Roles .......................................................................................................................... 14
    Difficulties .............................................................................................................................. 15
    Preparation ............................................................................................................................. 18
    Need for School Counselor Advocacy .................................................................................. 20
      Ties to academic reform and the achievement gap .............................................................. 20
      Positive development of all students ................................................................................. 22
      Social-ecological context ...................................................................................................... 22
    Advocacy Models ................................................................................................................... 23
    Advocacy Competencies ........................................................................................................ 25
    Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 26

CHAPTER 3 – METHOD ..................................................................................................................28
  Research Design ......................................................................................................................... 28
    Rationale for Qualitative Research ....................................................................................... 29
    Role of the Researcher in Qualitative Research ..................................................................... 30
  Participants ................................................................................................................................ 30
    Rationale for Choice of Participants ..................................................................................... 31
    Steps to Acquire Participants ................................................................................................. 31
  Instrumentation .......................................................................................................................... 32
  Procedure .................................................................................................................................. 34
    Data Collection ....................................................................................................................... 34
      Interview data ....................................................................................................................... 34
      Document data ..................................................................................................................... 34
    Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 35
Research validity and reliability ........................................35
  Internal validity .........................................................36
  External validity .......................................................37
  Reliability ...............................................................38
  Safeguards against researcher bias ....................................38

Limitations of the Study ..................................................39

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS ..................................................40
  Participant Profiles ......................................................41
    Anne ..............................................................................41
    Barbara ..........................................................................42
    Clara ..............................................................................43

  Development of Advocacy Competencies ...............................45
    Dispositions ...............................................................45
    Knowledge .................................................................48
    Skills ..............................................................................50
    Summary ........................................................................55

Promoting School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies ......55
Hindrances to School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies ..62

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION ................................................67
  Development of Advocacy Competencies ...............................67
    Dispositions ...............................................................68
    Knowledge .................................................................69
    Skills ..............................................................................70

Promoting School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies ......74
Hindrances to School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies ..78
Limitations ........................................................................81
Implications ........................................................................82

REFERENCES .....................................................................87

APPENDICES .....................................................................93
  Appendix A: Informed Consent Form ....................................94
  Appendix B: Interview Guide .............................................96
  Appendix C: Interview Guide Development Process .................98
  Appendix D: Expert Evaluation of Interview Guide .................100
  Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire ..............................106
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  Participants’ Demographic Information………………………………41
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling in schools began during the Progressive Movement in the early twentieth century. This time of social protest and reform sought to improve the negative societal conditions created by the Industrial Revolution. In response to these negative social conditions, guidance and counseling programs, originally called vocational guidance, were first implemented. These programs were most often created through the appointment of teachers as vocational counselors and the positions were carried out with no formal structure or organization within which to operate (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

As the twentieth century progressed, however, social, political, and economic events as well as educational reform movements increasingly influenced the practice of guidance and counseling in schools. While the vocational focus remained, a more clinical, psychological focus took hold and an emphasis on counseling and testing emerged. In particular, the Vocational Education Act of 1946 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 helped shaped school counseling. As a result of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, schools were provided with more full-time guidance and counseling personnel. As full-time school counselors became more common, the role of the school counselor focused on individual counseling as opposed to a program of counseling. The services provided by school counselors were often seen as ancillary and remedial. The position of school counselor was viewed as merely that of support personnel (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).
The idea of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs has emerged in modern times, however, with a focus on integrating the guidance and counseling program into the total school mission. School counselors are now charged with the tasks of providing both individual counseling and large group guidance programming such that the academic, personal/social, and career development of all students is enhanced (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

**Statement of the Problem**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model and the Education Trust advanced the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) as guidelines for comprehensive school counseling programs. Advocacy is identified in each of these guidelines as a fundamental role for school counselors. The school counseling research literature also calls for the role of school counselors to include social advocacy (House & Martin, 1999). According to the literature, school counselors’ social advocacy efforts can ensure that all students gain access to a rigorous curriculum as well as to the support they need in order to succeed in school. Thus, school counselor advocacy promotes the positive development of all students (Akos & Galassi, 2004), contributes to academic reform (Bemak, 2000), narrows the achievement gap (House & Martin, 1999), increases college access for underrepresented students (Schaeffer, 2009), and leads to increased equity in schools (House & Hayes, 2002). These significant benefits to students resulting from school counselor advocacy make advocacy the ethical responsibility of all school counselors (ASCA, 2004).
The benefits of advocacy in school counseling are rooted in the importance of the social and ecological context in which students exist. The context of students’ lives affects their development and their learning. Because a student’s environment, i.e., their family, school, and community, is a major factor in determining that student’s behavior as well as educational outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), social advocacy can have a significant impact on both students and their families.

The existing literature on school counselor advocacy is primarily theoretical in nature. While it consistently underlines the benefits of social advocacy and calls for an advocacy role for counselors, school counselors’ development of the skills and knowledge necessary for effective counselor advocacy is not thoroughly understood. The literature is full of definitions and frameworks for school counselor advocacy (Field, 2002; Field & Baker, 2004; House & Hayes, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee, 1998; Schaeffer, 2009), as well as studies focusing on school counselors’ advocacy behaviors (Field, 2002; Field & Baker, 2004; Schaeffer, 2009; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). No studies exist, however, which focus on school counselors’ development of the ability to advocate effectively. Consequently, this study seeks to further the modern understanding of how school counselors effectively develop the competencies (dispositions, knowledge, and skills) necessary to be successful advocates for their students. The findings from this study will point to effective means of increasing the advocacy competencies of all school counselors.
Conceptual Framework

Trusty and Brown (2005) defined specific competencies necessary for school counselors to be effective advocates for their students and families. The competencies fall into three domains: dispositions, knowledge, and skills. According to Trusty and Brown, school counselors should possess advocacy dispositions as well as certain knowledge and skills in order to be successful advocates. This conceptual framework will be used to develop the research and interview questions for this study, and will be applied in analyzing the resulting data.

Definition of Key Terms

Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2000) defines an advocate as, “A person who pleads another’s cause,” and, “A person who speaks or writes in support of something.” According to Lee (1998), a successful advocate intervenes on behalf of a student and affects systemic variables and decisions impacting students’ development and education. Advocacy is defined as the process of, “Helping clients [students and their families] challenge institutional and social barriers that impede academic, career, or personal-social development,” (Lee, 1998).

The advocacy competencies as defined by Trusty and Brown (2005) are divided into three domains: dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Dispositions are closely related to personal views and beliefs. Trusty and Brown identified four dispositions: advocacy dispositions, family support/empowerment dispositions, social advocacy dispositions, and ethical dispositions. The knowledge domain consists of familiarity with resources,
parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change principles. The skills identified by Trusty and Brown are communication skills, collaboration skills, problem-assessment skills, problem-solving skills, organizational skills, and self-care skills.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how effective school counselor advocates developed the advocacy competencies necessary for successful advocacy for students and their families. The research questions are: How do school counselors develop advocacy competencies? What do school counselors perceive as promoting the development of school counselor advocacy competencies? and What do school counselors perceive as hindering the development of school counselor advocacy competencies?

This study will use a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the development of advocacy competencies in school counselors. The multiple case study approach will enable an in-depth understanding of effective school counselor advocates and the particular circumstances and methods through which they developed advocacy competencies. Retrospective interviews will explore the phenomenological experiences of multiple school counselors with developing advocacy competencies, and will shed light on the development of advocacy competencies through the counselors’ own descriptions of how they became effective advocates for students and their families.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The call for school counselors to increase their role and efforts as advocates is seen throughout the theoretical and research literature for school counseling. The current models and guidelines for school counseling programs, the American School Counselor Association’s National Model (ASCA, 2005) and The Education Trust’s Transforming School Counseling Initiative (The Education Trust, 2009a), each identify advocacy as a fundamental role for school counselors. The advocacy efforts of school counselors can ensure academic equity for all students, advance academic reform efforts and close the achievement gap (Bemak, 2000; House & Hayes, 2002) as well as promote the positive development of all students (Akos & Galassi, 2004) by focusing on the social and ecological context in which students exist.

This literature review examines the history of school counseling and the current models for comprehensive guidance and counseling programs with a focus on the development of school counselor advocacy. The review discusses the literature’s definitions of advocacy and the advocacy behaviors identified by the research. The school counselor’s role as advocate and the difficulties associated with that role are also examined. The various levels on which counselors can and should advocate are discussed along with the current state of school counselors’ preparation and training to advocate. This literature review also addresses the benefits of school counselor advocacy and the various advocacy models found in the literature. Finally, the advocacy competencies for school counselors are examined.
School Counseling

Background and History

School counseling, or guidance as it was originally called, initially began in the schools as a class with a curriculum, the goals of which evolved from the social reform movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Baker & Gerler, 2008). Since its inception, many events both within and external to the sphere of education have influenced and shaped guidance in the schools. The evolution of school counseling can be divided into three movements: the Vocational Guidance Movement, the Psychometric Movement, and the Mental Health Movement (Baker & Gerler, 2008).

The Vocational Guidance Movement began in 1908 when Frank Parsons started a Vocation Bureau in Boston, Massachusetts. The purpose of the bureau, and the focus of guidance and counseling in schools at the time, was to provide vocational information and guidance to youth that were out of school (Baker & Gerler, 2008). Similar programs were introduced in other metropolitan areas and several universities offered courses in vocations. In addition, the federal government passed legislation that subsidized vocational education and training for teachers (Baker & Gerler, 2008).

The Psychometric Movement began in the first quarter of the 20th century with the development of Alfred Binet and T. Simon’s mental abilities measure and continued with the development of the Army Alpha and Beta tests in 1917 (Baker & Gerler, 2008). The assessments popularized the idea of group testing and offered school guidance personnel a means for assessment. “Vocational guidance workers found testing attractive as an
apparently scientific means of determining a person’s interests, strengths, and limitations” (Baker & Gerler, 2008, p. 28). The seeming precision of psychometric tests lent credibility to guidance personnel. “Psychometrics emphasized objectivity, individual differences, prediction, classification, and placement” (Baker & Gerler, 2008, p. 28) and with this focus came a tendency to rely on testing as the basis for guidance.

The Mental Health Movement in school guidance resulted from both Clifford Beers’ publishing of *A Mind That Found Itself* in 1908, which initiated reforms throughout the mental health community, as well as the popularization of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories. “These activities lead to a newfound interest in the importance of the formative years as the foundation of personality and development” (Baker & Gerler, 2008, p. 29). The focus of school counseling again shifted, this time towards a more clinical focus.

According to Gysbers and Henderson (2001), school counseling evolved over time from a position, to a service, to a program. The first school counselors were teachers appointed as vocational counselors. There was no organizational structure for vocational guidance and the assignment of other duties to the counselor was often a problem. As school counseling changed into a service, an organizational framework emerged known as pupil personnel work. Pupil personnel work included attendance officers, school nurses, and vocational counselors. The emphasis for school counseling at this time was on counseling and testing. The National Defense Act of 1958 resulted in more full-time personnel and school counselors replaced the teacher-counselors. According to Gysbers and Henderson (2001), there were six services associated with school counseling: orientation, assessment,
information, counseling, placement, and follow-up. At this point in the evolution of school counseling, the role of the school counselor was primarily remedial and reactive.

In the 1970’s school counseling as a program emerged along with an emphasis on guidance and counseling for development. Comprehensive programs increased in popularity due to a renewed interest in career guidance and developmental guidance and counseling (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Concern about the effectiveness of the services approach as well as a new emphasis on accountability and evaluation drove the call for comprehensive school counseling programs. This emphasis continued into the 1980’s and 1990’s and is now rapidly replacing the position-service orientation of school counseling with the acceptance of the ASCA National Model and the Education Trust’s TSCI.

**Contemporary Models**

**ASCA National Model.** The ASCA National Model utilizes the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and directly addresses current education reform. “The ASCA National Model provides the mechanism with which school counselors and school counseling teams will design, coordinate, implement, manage and evaluate their programs for students’ success” (ASCA, 2005, p. 9). The National Model provides a framework for school counseling program components and the school counselor’s role. According to the ASCA National Model “a school counseling program is comprehensive in scope, preventive in design and developmental in nature” (p. 13). All students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade are included and should have their
academic, career, and personal/social development enhanced through learning opportunities that meet the needs of the students at the appropriate developmental level.

The ASCA National Model incorporates the themes of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration and teaming, all of which lead to the goal of systemic change. “School counselors serve as leaders who are engaged in systemwide change to ensure student success” (ASCA, 2005, p. 24). School counselors need leadership abilities in order to institute systemic change. Collaboration is also important. According to the National Model, “school counselors work with all stakeholders, both inside and outside the school system, to develop and implement responsive educational programs that support the achievement of the identified goals for every student” (p. 25). With the goal of systemic change in mind, the National Model’s call for increased advocacy efforts is clear. According to the National Model, “School counselors advocate for students’ educational needs and work to ensure these needs are addressed at every level of the school experience. . . . School counselors work proactively with students to remove barriers to learning” (p. 24).

Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI). The Education Trust implemented the TSCI with the goal of “encouraging the creation of new model programs for the pre-service training of school counselors. . . . to prepare graduates to serve as student advocates and academic advisors who demonstrate the belief that all students can achieve at high levels on rigorous, challenging academic course content” (Martin, 2002, p. 148). According to Martin, the TSCI was designed to change school counseling and encourage social action and advocacy for educational access and to support all students, especially those underserved in
the past. The initiative aimed to make school counselors key players in accomplishing the mission of schools, academic success for all students, as well as to empower young people to achieve successful futures. “Leadership, advocacy, program development, and brokering services are all new counselor functions that the TSCI promotes” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 194). Again, the call for advocacy is central to this contemporary model for school counseling programs and school counselor training.

Advocacy

Definition

The literature is replete with descriptions of advocacy. According to Kiselica and Robinson (2001), there is a “growing movement to expand the practice of counseling from its traditional focus on the intrapsychic concerns of clients to a broader focus on the many extrapsychic forces that adversely affect the emotional and physical well-being of people” (p. 387). Through advocacy, counselors can impact those extrapsychic forces impacting clients’ and students’ development. “Advocacy on the part of a counselor should be part of an intervention that ultimately aims to help clients become empowered so that they can develop the skills to challenge systemic barriers and seize new educational, career, or personal-social opportunities for themselves” (Lee, 1998, p. 11).

Field (2002) found three themes related to participant definitions of school counselor advocacy, “(1) going beyond business as usual (2) naming specific advocacy behaviors and (3) maintaining focus on the student” (p. 94). Field’s finding that participants defined advocacy as going beyond traditional school counseling roles fits a general definition of
advocacy in which school counselors must extend the established boundaries and redefine their role in schools.

**Advocacy Behaviors**

Several studies have focused on describing the advocacy behaviors of school counselors. Field (2002) examined the frequency with which school counselors utilized advocacy behaviors, identified which advocacy behaviors were used most often, and compared the advocacy behaviors of school counselors based on the number of years experience as a school counselor. Participants in the study reported they frequently engaged in a wide range of advocacy behaviors such as actively listening to students, working with students from a different social class, and welcoming all students that need assistance. Field also found that school counselors with six or more years experience reported more advocacy behaviors than counselors with less experience.

Schaeffer (2009) examined school counselor advocacy for college access of underrepresented students. The study focused on defining advocacy, describing advocacy behaviors, and indentifying factors that impact the use of advocacy within the context of underrepresented students. According to Schaeffer (2009), “when defining advocacy, the participants stressed the importance of a disposition for advocacy as well as specific advocacy behaviors” (p. 114). Schaeffer found that participants described school counselors’ advocacy behaviors as utilization of the two-year college, use of communication and collaboration skills, use of data, facilitation of family empowerment, and work for systemic change. The behaviors identified in the study echo the suggestions for collaboration and use
of data found in the theoretical literature (Bemak, 2000; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee, 1998; The Education Trust, 2009b).

Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon (2010) constructed a grounded theory for school counselor advocacy. Using semi-structured interviews, the study focused on “the experiences of school counselors in enacting change, as well as on the strategies they used as advocates” (Singh et al., 2010, p. 137). Seven strategies participants used as advocates were identified. The strategies included “(a) using political savvy to navigate power structures, (b) consciousness raising, (c) initiating difficult dialogs, (d) building intentional relationships, (e) teaching students self-advocacy skills, (f) using data for marketing, and (g) educating others about the school counselor role of advocate” (p. 138). The investigators provided recommendations for improving school counselor advocacy preparation by directly teaching students to utilize the strategies identified in the study. Again, specific advocacy behaviors identified in this study reverberate the suggestions in the theoretical literature.

Levels of Advocacy

Different advocacy goals will necessitate advocating at different levels of the school and community. According to Ratts, DeKruyf, and Chen-Hayes (2007), “certain situations call for direct interventions with a student; others call for advocacy on behalf of a student. Some situations call for working in classrooms, others in the community or in the political arena” (p. 91). The American Counselor Association (ACA) identified advocacy competencies related to these different levels. The microlevel consists of client or student advocacy. Counselors can work with students on this level via student empowerment as well
as work on behalf of students with student advocacy (Ratts et al., 2007). The school or community advocacy level refers to both community collaboration, where counselors work with the community, and systems advocacy where counselors work on behalf of the community or school. At the macrolevel, counselors work with the public to provide information as well as on behalf of the public with social and political advocacy (Ratts et al., 2007).

House and Martin (1999) also divided counselor advocacy into three levels: working with students, working with the school system, and working with the community. School counselors work with students by removing barriers to student learning, teaching students skills to help themselves, educating students and families on how to navigate the bureaucracy of the school system, as well as teaching students and families to access resources and support systems. School counselors work with the school system when they use data to promote system change, collaborate with other school staff, provide staff development training, challenge the need for low-level classes, and present information to negate the stereotype of poor and minority children as lower achieving students. Finally, school counselors work with the community by promoting supportive resources, helping parents and members of the community work with schools, and identifying all available resources that will help students achieve.

**Shifting Roles**

A vague job description for school counselors has led to role confusion and ineffective definitions of school counselors’ duties. “Many schools still define school
counselors as positions rather than programs, emphasize maintenance and administrative tasks, and accentuate a clinical rather than educational focus” (Bemak, 2000, p. 324). The fuzzy definition of school counselors’ role in the school has lead to an ineffective use of their time and talents. According to Martin (2002):

Large numbers of practicing school counselors are functioning as highly paid clerical staff, quasi administrators and/or inadequately trained therapeutic mental health providers with unmanageable case loads. Their role/function is sometimes dictated by the district, the principal, the community in which they work, and/or their own personal preference (p. 150).

According to Bemak (2000), “the job description for school counselors must be redefined to align effectively with national and state educational objectives” (p. 323). In addition to clarifying the role of counselors in the schools, the call for advocacy to become a part of that role is found throughout the literature. “School counselors have the potential to play a major role in eliminating academic inequities. . . [by] assuming an advocacy role as part of their work with the aim toward creating social justice in the school environment” (Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 196). In order to promote the positive development of all students and narrow the achievement gap, the school counselor’s role must shift toward advocacy.

**Difficulties**

The literature identifies numerous personal and environmental factors that inhibit school counselor advocacy. According to McClure and Russo (1996) there are several
factors limiting counselors’ transition to an advocacy role. Counseling’s focus on the self, or
the individual, is one limiting factor. Counseling interventions are “aimed at changing the
client’s perception of reality rather than acknowledging that societal factors may be
responsible for the client’s plight” (McClure & Russo, 1996, p. 165). McClure and Russo
state that issues surrounding power and the status quo also hinder counselor advocacy as
power issues are seldom acknowledged in counseling. Furthermore, counselors often lack
power because “power comes from the institutions in which counselors work and from the
agencies that license them” (McClure & Russo, 1996, p. 166). Another factor limiting
counselor advocacy is the value of neutrality. “It is this assumed position of value neutrality
that has allowed counselors to portray themselves as professionally outside of the political
ideologies that shape their current social thinking” (McClure & Russo, 1996, p. 166). The
last factor, according to McClure and Russo, is the counseling profession’s search for
legitimacy. In pursuing this ideal, the profession has entered the domain of the other health
professions, and lost sight of its roots in wellness and holism.

In addition, there are often consequences associated with taking an advocacy stance
(Lee, 1998). Advocates have dealt with harassment from those that disagree as well as
backlash from co-workers. “There is often a high price to pay for being an activist, including
feeling emotionally drained, being viewed as a troublemaker, placing your job in jeopardy,
and becoming the target of backlash from colleagues and harassment from intolerant
individuals,” (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001, p. 393). The potential for developing a reputation
as a troublemaker can lead to disciplinary action from superiors or limited opportunities for
career advancement as well as ostracism by colleagues (Lee, 1998). “To advocate for all students means challenging the system, which has the potential to produce personal and professional difficulties. . . . Resistance and resentment for ‘rocking the boat’ are bound to occur” (Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 198).

According to Field and Baker (2004), the vague job description and assignment of other duties limits school counselors’ ability to advocate for students and their families. Furthermore, school counselors are often undervalued and not treated as professionals. In schools, there is a lack of communication among staff about the counselor’s role, leading to inefficient use of counselor time and limited opportunities for advocacy. School administrators also play a major role. Shaeffer (2009) found that the value school administrators place on advocacy directly impacts school counselors’ use of advocacy.

The “nice counselor syndrome” (NCS) is another contributor to school counselors’ limited advocacy role (Bemak & Chung, 2008). Counselors exhibiting NCS are well-meaning, nice people. “These counselors live up to their reputation by the manner in which they consistently strive to promote harmony with others while avoiding and deflecting interpersonal conflicts in the school setting” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 374). Counselors’ concern with preserving their reputation and others’ perception of them prevents their taking an advocacy stance and potentially disrupting the balance. “In short, school counselors exhibiting NCS strive to be agreeable by supporting the status quo and avoiding unpleasant realities related to the injustices and inequities many students of color and poor students are subjected to in many public school systems” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 374). In order to be
effective social justice advocates school counselors must reject the nice counselor syndrome (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

Aspects of the community also affect school counselor advocacy. According to Shaeffer (2009), “participants readily identified barriers in their community such as poverty and a lack of parental involvement” (p. 122). The Shaeffer study also found school district and state barriers to counselor advocacy such as an emphasis on high stakes testing and new high school graduation requirements. Despite the resounding call for advocacy in the literature, the barriers and hindrances counselors experience are real.

**Preparation**

The theoretical literature clearly calls for school counselors to receive advocacy training. “Counselor education programs should include intentional philosophy, curriculum, and processes that prepare graduates to work as social activists in their professional setting” (Collison et al., 1998, p. 263). In addition to the specific training counselors receive in working with individual students and clients, the literature suggests that counselors should be trained to work on a system level as well. “School counseling students can learn how to restructure school environments in ways that promote positive youth development. In addition, school counseling students can be purposefully trained in advocacy and leadership skills that alter systemic functions” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 202). Despite the consensus on the importance of including advocacy skills in counselor training, it is largely missing from graduate training programs. “Advocacy is markedly absent from most graduate school counseling training curricula, and social change, social reform, and school reform are not
typically discussed at all” (Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 199). Advocacy skills are often not part of professional development for practicing counselors either. “In-service training is a reflection of the defined role of school counselors, and markedly absent from in-service workshops are sessions related to social equity, leadership skills, or advocacy” (Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 199). The theoretical literature makes suggestions for the improvement of advocacy training. According to Akos and Galassi (2004):

Counseling interns can be required to identify opportunities to advocate for a student (or group of students) and to form an advocacy plan for one of these opportunities. In the process, interns can be instructed about appropriate ways to plan and deliver an advocacy intervention and can implement it under close supervision by faculty and site supervisors. (p. 203)

Several studies have focused on the current state of advocacy training for school counselors. Pennymon (2005) examined school counselors’ perceptions of helpful and hindering events in a master’s level training program. The study identified events as effective or ineffective training by whether the students’ respective advocacy attempts were successful. Pennymon found disparities between teaching advocacy on a theoretical level and actually implementing advocacy skills in a school setting. The study also found that the program’s mission statement, philosophy, and training model did not focus on advocacy. Pennymon found helpful events as well, however, such as cohort experiences, modeling by faculty members, and increased self-efficacy.
Ratts (2006) examined the advocacy training in counselor preparation programs across the United States and found only a moderate emphasis on advocacy competencies. Ratts also observed that advocacy efforts were focused on microlevel interventions (rather than macrolevel). Ratts recommended that advocacy competencies be further incorporated into counselor training through the creation of advocacy counseling specific textbooks and courses.

A study by Kircher (2007) examined the perceptions of school counselor educators of the importance of including the advocacy competencies (dispositions, knowledge, and skills) in master’s level school counselor training programs. The study also assessed the extent to which the competencies were taught in the program and the ability of program graduates to apply the advocacy competencies. The study compared the responses of members of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and non-CACREP schools. Kircher concluded that counselor educators perceived the advocacy competencies to be appropriate for inclusion, but that additional focus on them might be needed in order to ensure that all graduates learn and are able to apply the competencies. The need for improved training methods and an increased focus on the advocacy competencies in graduate training programs is clear.

Need for School Counselor Advocacy

Ties to academic reform and the achievement gap. Academic reform and closing the achievement gap are major topics in education. According to Martin (2002), “low income and minority students continue to leave school prior to graduation in alarming
proportions, not because they are unable to succeed, but because they are underchallenged academically and are placed disproportionately in special education and low-level, remedial classes” (p. 149). This gap in achievement between groups of students is a result of academic inequities in schools. “Low income and minority students are most likely to be taught by the least skilled teachers. Their schools are also more likely to have fewer instructional resources,” (Martin, 2002, p. 149). Advocacy on the part of school counselors can rectify these inequities. According to House and Hayes (2002), “[b]y helping students gain access to these rigorous courses, school counselors will promote equity for all students—especially those not currently served” (p. 249). Therefore, school counselor advocacy is directly linked to academic reform and closing the achievement gap.

In addition, school counselors are in a unique position to advocate for academic equity. School counselors have access to quantitative and qualitative data from both school and community sources and can use that data to advocate for students (House & Hayes, 2002). School counselors can utilize these data to promote the success of all students. Specifically, “by analyzing data routinely, counselors can actively monitor the progress of underrepresented students in all courses and provide assistance and/or interventions as needed. . . . Once identified, students from underrepresented groups can be targeted for enrollment in rigorous academic courses” (House & Hayes, 2002, p. 254). According to House and Hayes, counselors can then work with others in the school to implement the necessary support systems to ensure academic success.
**Positive development of all students.** School counselor advocacy is also needed to ensure the positive development of all students. With the educational system’s growing emphasis on academic reform and closing the achievement gap, schools cannot lose sight of the importance of the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students. “The developmental advocate will inevitably be involved in efforts to remove barriers that impede development, but the primary focus is on lobbying for policies, opportunities, and activities that promote or enhance academic, career, and personal/social development” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 200). Counselors’ advocacy efforts can ensure the positive development of all students.

**Social-ecological context.** The traditional focus of school counseling has been on the individual student and has often ignored the context and the environment in which the student lives and develops. “The origin of problems and impediments to effective decision making often lie not in individuals but in an intolerant, restrictive, or unsafe environment” (Lee, 1998, p. 3). The student’s environment is frequently the source of his or her problems. “Problematic behavior can often be traced to the negative effects of environment on cognitive and affective functioning” (Lee, 1998, p. 5). Therefore, in order to adequately serve students, school counselors are challenged to engage in interventions that affect the environment. According to Menacker (1976):

It is quite likely that, when the two are in conflict, it is the school rather than the student that is pathological. The need is therefore to ‘adjust’ the school rather than the
student. The guidance specialist must not only help the student adapt to the school but help the school adapt to the student. (p. 320)

The school environment can be changed to maximize student achievement and development through advocacy.

**Advocacy Models**

Svec (1990) designed an advocacy model for school psychologists to advocate for students at risk of dropping out of school. The model focused on changing schools’ institutional behavior. Brown and Trusty (2005) adapted the model to apply more broadly. In their adaptation, the first step is to describe the school policy or environmental aspect the advocate seeks to change. Advocates should then brainstorm more appropriate environments as well as analyze the causes and effects of the inappropriate environment. Next, according to this model, advocates design and implement antecedent events and consequences to increase appropriate environmental aspects. Throughout this model, counselors should empower the students and encourage them to advocate for themselves. Finally, advocates should follow up and monitor the school environment.

Eriksen (1997) designed an advocacy model that fits best with advocacy efforts on behalf of the counseling profession. The model is composed of seven stages. Stage one is related to professional identity, counselor confidence and stability in personal beliefs. According to the model, counselors must be confident in their professional identity and belief systems in order to advocate effectively. Stage two of this model is problem identification. The problem should be identified and described using language that will inspire action. The
third stage is resource assessment. At this point, counselors ascertain the human and material resources that can be used in the advocacy effort. Stage four is strategic planning of the advocacy effort while stage five is training those involved with the effort. Stage six is taking action. In this stage, the plan is implemented. The final stage of this model is evaluation of the outcome and then either celebrating the victory or regrouping after the loss. According to Brown and Trusty (2005), the model is flexible can also be applied to individuals or groups.

Fiedler (2000) designed an advocacy model for special education professionals. The steps of this model include problem definition, information gathering, action planning, assertive action, and follow-up. The Fiedler advocacy model can be applied to individual students as well as groups of students and their families and can be implemented by individual counselors as well as groups (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

Brown and Trusty (2005) integrated Svec, Eriksen, and Fiedler’s advocacy models to propose best practices in the advocacy process. The authors suggested that counselors understand their professional identity in regards to advocacy dispositions. Brown and Trusty also recommend that counselors clearly and objectively define the problem for which they are going to advocate change. Counselors gather and use data and resources to develop a specific action plan. Throughout the advocacy process counselors monitor change and follow up on changes and solutions. Brown and Trusty also urged counselors to empower the students for whom they advocate and celebrate successes and reward efforts at the close of the process.
Advocacy Competencies

Brown and Trusty (2005) defined the advocacy competencies for school counselors in response to calls for increased school counselor advocacy throughout the literature. According to Brown and Trusty, the competencies are composed of three domains: dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Brown and Trusty identified specific competencies within each of these three domains.

The disposition competencies identified are essentially personal characteristics of the counselor. Brown and Trusty identified four dispositions. An advocacy disposition refers to a counselor’s awareness and appreciation of their advocacy role. A family support/empowerment disposition is defined as recognizing that parents and guardians are the best advocates for their students. Counselors exhibiting this disposition join parents and empower them to advocate for their children. The social advocacy disposition extends advocacy beyond the particular student to all people as well as the counseling profession as a whole. An ethical disposition values the professional code of ethics and analyzes situations according to ethical principles.

The knowledge competencies include what counselors know about resources, parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change (Brown & Trusty, 2005). Knowledge of resources includes resources in the school as well the community at large. They include people, agencies, programs, and any other resource that may benefit students and their families. Knowledge of parameters includes school policies as well as the legal rights of students and families. Knowledge of dispute resolution
mechanisms includes mediation and conflict resolution strategies. Knowledge of advocacy models gives direction to advocacy efforts, while knowledge of systems change helps counselors form relationships that bridge the numerous subsystems involved in students’ education and lives.

The skills competencies refer to what counselors are able to do. Skills include communication skills such as empathy and reflective listening as well as the ability to communicate the problems and solutions to others. Collaboration skills are also necessary because counselors must build partnerships with administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the community in order to effectively advocate. Problem-assessment and problem-solving skills are also included in the skills domain as are organizational skills. The final set of skills is related to self-care. The risks and consequences associated with advocacy can be stressful and can lead to burnout. It is important that counselors possess adequate coping skills in order to continue to advocate for students.

**Conclusion**

The existing literature on school counselor advocacy is primarily conceptual in nature. While it consistently emphasizes the benefits of social advocacy and calls for an advocacy role for counselors, school counselors’ development of the skills and knowledge necessary for effective counselor advocacy is not thoroughly understood. The literature defines and provides frameworks for school counselor advocacy (Field, 2002, Field & Baker, 2004; House & Hayes, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee, 1998; Schaeffer, 2009) as well as
highlights the difficulties and potential consequences of taking an advocacy stance (Field, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee, 1998; McClure & Russo, 1996; Schaeffer, 2009).

Existing studies focus on school counselors’ advocacy behaviors (Field, 2002; Field & Baker, 2004; Schaeffer, 2009; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010) and the perceptions of school counselors and counselor educators of the preparation provided by graduate training programs (Kircher, 2007; Pennymon, 2005; Ratts, 2006). No studies exist, however, which directly focus on school counselors’ development of the ability to advocate effectively. Consequently, this study seeks to further the modern understanding of how school counselors effectively develop the competencies (dispositions, knowledge, and skills) necessary to be successful advocates for their students. The findings from this study will point to effective means of increasing the advocacy competencies of all school counselors.
Chapter 3

METHOD

This chapter describes the research design and methods that were used in the present study. The type of design, rationale for the use of qualitative methods, and role of the researcher are discussed. The selection of participants and means of gaining access to participants are also addressed in the chapter. Data collection methods for interviews and documents are included. The data analysis is described and means of ensuring reliability and validity are detailed.

Research Design

A phenomenological design was used in the present study. “A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). According to Creswell, phenomenological research focuses on describing the experiences of a group of people sharing a common concept or event. The shared phenomenon that was examined in the present study was the development of school counselor advocacy competencies.

A descriptive multiple-case study design was used in order to understand school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies. According to Yin (2009), “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18). The purpose of the study was to examine how school counselors who are believed to be effective advocates develop the advocacy competencies necessary for successful advocacy for their students. The multiple-case study design was the best means
with which to address the study’s purpose because it allowed for the exploration of exemplary school counselor advocates’ personal experiences of becoming effective advocates and developing advocacy competencies. The North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted the researcher permission to conduct the present study.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**

According to Marshall and Rossman (1989), qualitative methods are particularly effective for studies in which the research, for practical or ethical reasons, cannot be done experimentally. The retrospective aspect of this study necessitated the use of a qualitative design, as the research could not be done via experimental methods. Marshall and Rossman also explained that qualitative methods are appropriate for research that is exploratory or descriptive and stresses the importance of context, setting, and participants’ frame of reference. Each of these aspects was particularly important to the present study, as they were all potential factors that influenced school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies. According to Marshall and Rossman:

"Human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs; thus one must study that behavior in situations. The physical setting—e.g., schedules, space, pay, and rewards—and the internalized notions of norms, traditions, roles, and values are crucial contextual variables. Research must be conducted in the setting where all the contextual variables are operating (p. 49)."
Because of its ability to retrospectively describe phenomena and incorporate context, setting, and frame of reference, qualitative research was the best means by which to investigate exemplary school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies.

**Role of the Researcher in Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research requires the researcher to interact directly with the study participants. This interaction increases the potential for the researcher’s bias to affect the data. In the present study, the researcher acknowledged potential bias due to being a school counseling student and a provisionally-licensed school counselor in addition to a researcher. The researcher also had experience teaching in a high school setting, and subscribed to the belief that advocacy is essential to ensuring the success of all students.

**Participants**

The participants were selected via purposeful sampling. “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Purposefully selecting effective advocates enabled an in-depth understanding of the particular circumstances and methods through which they developed advocacy competencies by exploring the phenomenological experiences of the participants with developing advocacy competencies. Three school counselors were selected for this study. Selection of the counselors was based on their membership in a population of exemplary school counselor advocates. All participants were current or former recipients of the North Carolina School Counselor Association’s (NCSCA) School Counselor of the Year Award. Including only
award recipients ensured that each participant was an exemplary school counselor advocate as evidenced by having met the award criteria.

**Rationale for Choice of Participants**

According to NCSCA (2010), the School Counselor of the Year Award is presented to outstanding school counselors. Recipients make a positive impact in their school, use the ASCA National Model, use data-driven practices, and implement a comprehensive counseling program. Award recipients show evidence of innovations in counseling and exhibit leadership in their school as well as the profession. The award criteria align closely with advocacy behaviors identified in the research literature, specifically the use of collaboration and communications skills and the use of data (Schaeffer, 2009). Furthermore, advocacy efforts are at the heart of the ASCA National Model and are required for successful innovation. Advocacy is therefore an underlying criterion for the award and characteristic of award recipients.

**Steps to Acquire Participants**

The population of exemplary school counselor advocates was ordered chronologically by award year. The three most recent award winners, 2010 NCSCA Counselor of the Year Award winners for high school, middle school, and elementary school, were contacted first. These prospective participants were sent a formal letter via email explaining the study and asking for their participation along with an informed consent form (see Appendix A). Sample interview questions were included so that participants could make an informed decision regarding their participation in the study. As prospective participants declined to
participate, the next most recent award recipients were contacted beginning with the 2009 high school award winner, followed by the 2009 middle school winner, and then the 2009 elementary award winner. This process of contacting prospective participants continued until three counselors agreed to participate. The first three school counselors to accept the invitation to participate were included in the study. The initial email was followed up by email or telephone contact with those who agreed to participate in order to schedule the interviews. In order to maintain participants’ confidentiality and not reveal their identities, the years in which participants received the award are not disclosed.

**Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain the perspectives of exemplary school counselor advocates on the development of advocacy competencies. “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). In order to ensure that each participant received the same line of inquiry, an interview guide was employed (see Appendix B). The questions were structured such that participants created their own interpretations and responses and were not confined by the perspective of the research. Probes were used to deepen the response of the participants and encourage them to elaborate in greater detail.

The research questions as well as the conceptual framework guided the interview questions. The framework provided by Brown and Trusty’s (2005) advocacy competencies details three domains necessary for effective school counselor advocacy: dispositions,
knowledge, and skills. These three domains were used to develop the interview questions and the inquiry focused on the school counselors’ development of the domains of advocacy competency (see Appendix C for details on the development of the interview guide).

The literature also guided the interview questions. The existing body of knowledge served as the foundation for questions assessing participants’ perceptions of what hinders or promotes the development of school counselor advocacy competencies. Factors affecting school counselors’ ability to advocate such as systemic issues, community issues, administration, parent involvement, and time constraints have been identified in the literature (Bemak, 2000; Shaeffer, 2009). These specific aspects were used as probes to deepen the counselors’ responses in regards to their development of the advocacy competencies.

Three experts in the field of school counseling assessed the interview guide for clarity and potential effectiveness. The experts evaluated the questions using a Likert scale evaluation guide (see Appendix D). Questions with mean evaluation ratings below 4.0 were to be removed from the interview guide. No questions were removed from the interview guide.

The interview guide was also assessed using a pilot case. While the case was chosen based on convenience, access, and geographical proximity, it assisted in identifying confusing questions that required rewording or which yielded useless or irrelevant data. The use of a pilot case allowed for suggestions from the interviewee for additional questions not originally included. One question was reworded for clarity. No questions were added or removed from the interview guide.
A questionnaire (see Appendix E) was used to collect basic demographic information from participants. The survey consisted of six questions and gathered information about the counselors such as age, gender, number of years experience, and number of years at the current school. These demographic data were used to develop a rich description of each participant.

**Procedure**

**Data Collection**

**Interview data.** Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data for the present study. Interviews were scheduled to accommodate the school counselors’ schedules. Each counselor was interviewed using an open-ended, structured interview guide (Appendix B). The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interview questions targeted the counselors’ perceptions of how they developed the competencies necessary for effective advocacy.

Interviews were taped for the purposes of the study. Tapes were transcribed and participants given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Audiotapes and transcripts were secured by the researcher in a locked filing cabinet and were available only to the researcher and the thesis committee members. Tapes and transcripts will be maintained for five years after the completion of the study.

**Document data.** The counselors were asked to provide copies of their resumes. These resumes provided information about the counselors’ experience and training as related to the advocacy competencies. Documents were collected at the end of each interview. All
documents were stored by the researcher in a locked filing cabinet and were available only to the researcher and the thesis committee. Documents will be maintained for five years after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). When using this method, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As data were collected, the researcher conducted an initial analysis by reading through each interview transcript, set of field notes, or document, making notes, observations, and comments and keeping a list of possible codes (Bogdan & Biklen). Once the preliminary list of codes was generated, the researcher assigned the codes to units of data to determine the usefulness of the codes. At this time, codes were modified and new codes developed. Similar codes were eliminated or combined. Once the coding categories were finalized, the researcher went through all of the data and marked each unit with the appropriate code (Bogdan & Biklen). Qualitative research software, Atlas.ti, was used in the analysis to code all data and group the data into emergent themes. The researcher looked for common experiences or ideas among the participants in order to construct a model that represents their development of school counselor advocacy competencies.

Research validity and reliability. Efforts to ensure the validity and reliability of the study’s findings were implemented. However, “qualitative research is based on different assumptions regarding reality, thus demanding different conceptualizations of validity and
reliability” (Merriam, n.d., para. 5). Qualitative definitions and the steps taken to strengthen the internal and external validity and reliability of the study are presented.

**Internal validity.** As defined by quantitative research, internal validity is a measure of the congruence of a study’s findings with reality. In other words, it asks whether the study actually measures what it purports to measure. However, qualitative research is based on the assumption that reality is subjective and based on the phenomenological experiences of individuals. Therefore, the strategies for ensuring the internal validity of a study’s findings are different for qualitative research than for quantitative studies. In the present study, the methods of triangulation and member checks were utilized.

The use of triangulation enhanced the internal validity of the findings. In the present study, multiple sources of data were used in the form of multiple cases. In addition, multiple methods of data collection were utilized. In the present study interviews, documents, and observations were used. The triangulation of multiple data sources and multiple methods increased the likelihood that the perceptions of the participants were presented truthfully (Merriam, n.d.).

Member checks were also used in this study. The researcher shared the data and her interpretations of the data with the study participants for their evaluation and confirmation. The participants’ corroboration of the plausibility of the findings enhanced the study’s internal validity.
**External validity.** External validity is typically used to describe the extent to which a study’s findings can be generalized to other samples and populations. The purpose of qualitative research, however, is to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true for many (Merriam, 1998, p. 210). What is learned about a particular situation can transfer to other similar situations. Therefore, according to Merriam, qualitative research seeks to establish reader or user generalizability by providing sufficient information about the study so that the reader can determine the extent to which the study’s findings apply to other situations.

The use of rich description enhanced the study’s external validity. Detailed information was provided about the participants such that readers could determine the similarity of their case to the cases studied. With sufficient information, the reader can evaluate whether the study’s findings can be transferred to another case.

The multiple-case design also enhanced this study’s external validity. The use of multiple cases introduced variability and facilitated the application of the results to a greater range of situations. The use of multiple cases also enabled the replication of results, further enhancing the study’s external validity. According to Yin (2009), “each individual case study consists of a ‘whole’ study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the facts and conclusions for the case; each case’s conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by other individual cases” (p. 56).
Reliability. As with validity, the qualitative interpretation of reliability differs from that of quantitative research. Reliability in quantitative research refers to replication of findings and the extent to which the same results will be found if the study is repeated. Qualitative research, however, defines reliability as whether the results of the study are consistent with the data that were collected.

Reliability was established through the use of triangulation and the establishment of an audit trail. Triangulation through the use of multiple sources of data as well as multiple methods of data collection ensured the reliability of the present study’s findings. In order to establish the audit trail, each step of the study was described in detail. The interview protocol was provided as well as the details of how the interviews were conducted. The process for observations and document collection was also described in detail. Data analysis, the construction of categories and codes, and interpretations thereof were also described in detail. This audit trail enabled the reader to determine the consistency of the results with the data collected, increasing the reliability of the study.

Safeguards against researcher bias. Measures to control for possible researcher bias were implemented. The use of member checks is one method that was utilized. The researcher also made use of field notes and a self-reflective journal that were written and reviewed after each interview. The field notes and journal assisted the researcher in personal reflection and the bracketing of assumptions about school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies (Ponterotto & Greiger, 2007, p. 414). The technique of bracketing the researcher’s personal views and experiences was central to phenomenological research so
that participants’ experiences were treated as objects of study and their ideas studied in terms of the participants’ interpretations. Each of these safeguards reduced potential researcher bias.

**Limitations of the Study**

Potential limitations of the study included threats to credibility and transferability. The researcher’s teaching experience and status as a school counseling student and provisionally-licensed school counselor introduced potential bias as well. Multiple steps were taken, however, (i.e., triangulation, member checks and bracketing) to reduce the potential threats to reliability and validity. In addition, the small sample size inherently limited the diversity of the sample, therefore the sample was not representative of the entire population of school counselors, and the study can only be generalized to other similar populations.

Despite these limitations, this study seems to have the potential to further the school counseling profession’s understanding of the advocacy competencies and development of them by school counselors. The study added to the existing body of knowledge and could lead to further research on the most effective means of facilitating school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies and their ability to advocate for students, promoting the positive development of all students and increasing equity in schools.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

This chapter provides the results of the participant interviews and document collection. The data were sorted into three categories that align with the three research questions. The first question describes how the participants developed the advocacy competencies. This question is subdivided into the advocacy competencies for professional school counselors’ (Brown & Trusty, 2005) three domains: dispositions, knowledge, and skills. The second question describes school counselors’ perceptions of what promotes the development of school counselor advocacy competencies. Finally, the third question describes school counselors’ perceptions of what hinders their development of the advocacy competencies.

Chapter IV begins with a detailed description of the participants to lend context and facilitate understanding of the findings. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and their profiles are presented in the order in which they were interviewed. Next, the data related to participants’ development of advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills are presented. The participants’ perceptions of what helps school counselors develop advocacy competencies are presented next, followed by perceived hindrances in the development of school counselor advocacy competencies.
## Participant Profiles

Table 1

*Participants’ Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Barbara</th>
<th>Clara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Award</td>
<td>NCSCA Middle School Counselor of the Year</td>
<td>NCSCA Middle School Counselor of the Year</td>
<td>NCSCA Elementary School Counselor of the Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years counseling experience</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years at current school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Anne

Anne was a 60 year-old Caucasian middle school counselor. She had been a counselor for 21 years and had been at her current school for seven years. She was the lead counselor and Student Services Department Chair. She was also currently the school’s Homebound Coordinator and the Student Support Team (SST) coordinator. Anne was a member of the Crisis Team and the School Leadership Team. She previously served as the Building Testing Coordinator and the Homeless School Contact. Before going to her current...
school, Anne was the Lead Counselor and Student Services Department Chair at another middle school where she worked for nine years. She had worked in five middle schools.

Anne earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology before going on to receive a Master of Education degree in Counseling with a concentration in Rehabilitation. Several years after receiving her Master of Education, Anne returned to school to earn a K-12 Certification in School Counseling. Prior to receiving her certification in School Counseling, Anne was the Executive Director and Rehabilitation Counselor for five years at an agency serving mentally handicapped adults. She also worked for two years as a school-unit rehabilitation counselor. In that position, she worked collaboratively with counselors at six high schools to assess student needs and provide medical and psychological services to students. Anne was a former recipient of the North Carolina School Counselor Association (NCSCA) Middle School Counselor of the Year award.

**Barbara**

Barbara was a 44 year-old African American school counselor. She had been a counselor for 17 years and had been at her current school for five years. Barbara was the lead counselor as well as the 504 plan contact for her grade level. She was a member of the school’s Leadership Team, the Student Support Team, and was the secretary of the Business Alliance Committee. At the time of the interviews, she currently served on the school system’s Grading Practices Committee. She previously served as a member of the School Improvement Team, the School Data Team, as the Peer Mediator Coordinator for her grade level, and as a co-facilitator of the county-wide eighth grade Professional Learning Team.
(PLT). Prior to her current position, Barbara was a counselor at an alternative middle school for one year. Barbara also worked as an elementary school counselor for 11 years before making the transition to a middle school.

Barbara earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology prior to receiving her Certification in Early Childhood Education one year later. She then worked as an elementary school teacher for three years while earning a Master of Arts degree in Student Personnel along with a Certification in Counselor Education, grades K – 12.

In addition to her work as a school counselor and teacher, Barbara had served as a supervising counselor for several counselor interns at both the elementary and middle school levels and completed School Counselor Mentor training a few years ago. She is a member of numerous professional organizations including the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), North Carolina School Counselor Association (NCSCA), North Carolina Counselor Association (NCCA), and the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE). Barbara has presented at numerous state and county level conferences. She has also been heavily involved in community service, serving as a youth mentor, phone counselor at a mental health agency, and Brownie Girl Scout Troop co-leader. Barbara was a former recipient of the NCSCA Middle School Counselor of the Year award.

Clara

Clara was 31 year-old Caucasian elementary school counselor. She had been a counselor for nine years, spending the last four years at her current school. Clara served as the primary counselor for students in first, second, and fourth grade. She was a Student
Support Team Case Manager and the Response to Interventions facilitator for two grade levels. She had been on the Positive Behavior Support team and the School Improvement Team. Clara recently developed and updated the Emergency Operations Plan and Crisis Plan for her school.

Prior to her current position, Clara was the primary counselor for kindergarten through sixth grade students at an elementary school in Florida. There she served as the local education authority for the Exceptional Students Education Program, facilitated the Response to Interventions Team, and coordinated the 504 and school-wide testing programs.

Clara also worked as a middle school counselor for four years before making the transition to elementary school. At her middle school, she served as the primary counselor for seventh and eighth grade students, coordinated the 504 program, school-wide testing, and volunteer program, and participated in the Student Assistance Program meetings and managed student cases. Clara earned a Teaching Fellows scholarship that she utilized to receive a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education. She proceeded to graduate school the following year to earn a Master of Education degree in School Counseling. Clara has presented at the ASCA national conference, the NCSCA conference, the Eastern NCSCA meeting, the Central NCSCA meeting, and the Capital NCSCA meeting. She was an ASCA member as well as a NCSCA and NCCA member. Clara was a former recipient of the NCSCA Elementary School Counselor of the Year award.
Development of Advocacy Competencies

This section deals with the participants’ perceptions of school counselors’ development in each of the three advocacy competency domains: dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Study participants emphasized experience, making conscious decisions, having role models and mentors, and professional development. In describing how they developed advocacy competencies, participants also stressed consultation with other counselors, self-reflection, and building relationships with students, parents, and school staff.

Dispositions

When asked to describe how they developed the personal characteristics, or dispositions, necessary for effective advocacy efforts, all participants emphasized experience. They spoke of counseling experience as an integral part of their development of advocacy dispositions. Clara stated, “I think I’m definitely a better advocate now than I was when I first started as a counselor.” Practice and time on the job helps counselors know when advocacy is necessary.

Anne emphasized personal experiences in addition to counseling experience. She felt that particular life experiences increased her disposition toward advocacy. She said:

I think I developed that because of my childhood. I can understand where some of these kids are coming from. Just simply things that happened when I was this age [in middle school] and high school, I’m able to understand. I mean, I ran away from home and I was abused by my mom. So I’m able to understand that things like that
happen and what it feels like when you don’t have anyone or anyplace to go to. So, I guess that helped me [develop the personal characteristics for advocacy].

Anne’s experiences growing up greatly influenced her dispositions and attitudes. She said, “I guess personally, I understand how hurtful dysfunctional families are because I’m from that, and maybe that’s why I’m here doing what I’m doing.”

Barbara thought her experience as a teacher was instrumental in her development of advocacy dispositions. She said:

I think one plus for me, I had been a classroom teacher. So I know when I started as a counselor and I remember even in graduate school, one of my professors said, ‘Sometimes when you go in the profession, if you’re coming out of the classroom, sometimes teachers will take to you a little bit better because they know that you’ve been in their shoes.’ I know sometimes they feel that when people are coming from the outside they may not see the big picture of how a school runs or how to interact with parents and students.

Teaching experience lends credibility to counselors among other school staff. In addition, experience in the school setting gives background knowledge a new counselor without similar experience would lack.

Both Barbara and Clara said their experience in middle and elementary school grade levels and their experience in various communities facilitated their development of personal characteristics necessary for effective advocacy. Barbara said:
I’ve had different experiences as far as different school settings. I started out in the rural part of Wake County, I worked in North Raleigh, and I’ve worked in the inner beltline. Each population is different. With each of those experiences, I think it builds and just teaches you what’s the best way to approach a situation.

Working in varying settings and with different types of people expanded their worldview and helped them develop a social justice disposition. Barbara also said, “I know that you can be a better advocate if you can see the bigger picture and see the different places that students come from because sometimes it can be very, very different than what you know.”

Clara thought she made a conscious decision to take an advocacy stance and consciously worked to develop and enhance the attitudes that go along with advocating for students. Clara stated, “I really had to work on becoming stronger when I did advocate for a student.” The participants said it was a conscious decision they made to be advocates.

The participants stated that while some can be developed, the dispositions for effective advocacy are often innate. A counselor must want to make a difference for students. According to Anne, “I think to be an advocate you have to really feel that every child deserves an opportunity for a good education, a safe education, and that every child has that need. So, you have to enjoy working with children, you have to enjoy doing what you’re doing.” According to participants, the dispositions are linked to counselors’ belief systems, many of which are ingrained over time through experience.
Knowledge

Study participants also stressed experience as instrumental to their development of advocacy competencies. When asked how she developed the knowledge needed to be an effective advocate, Anne said, “Experience, and the kids teach you. The kids and the parents and just work with [them].” Anne emphasized that she developed knowledge of resources and advocacy models through experience. She went on to say, “It wasn’t through a class, it wasn’t through anything other than the needs of the students. It’s another need. Just like if they didn’t have lunch. All of these are things that the students need in order to be successful.” Anne sought out the knowledge necessary to help her students because they needed her help.

According to Clara, “You have to really know your school and your school climate and know what you’re supposed to be advocating for.” This type of knowledge only comes from experience. Experience as a counselor, and experience in a particular setting, at a particular school. Clara also said, “I think that knowing the climate of your school and what’s important to the staff members and not, what they haven’t even thought about yet. And it takes a good year to figure that out at a school and for them to figure you out, figure out they can trust you or your opinion. . . me being at a school for four or five years does make a difference.”

According to the participants, learning school policies is important, and also comes from experience. Advocacy is connected with the policies of a school and counselors must
learn how items such as absences and testing are handled at that school. Knowledge of these policies at a particular school only comes from practice and experience in that school.

Participants shared that much of the acquisition of knowledge comes from a conscious decision to seek out that knowledge. Clara said:

I had to educate myself with knowing what referral agencies are the best for what problem. So, I know when I make a referral it’s going to be a good one. Any time a kid is seeing a therapist at our school . . . I tell [parents], ‘I'm always looking for good referrals. If you’re really pleased with this therapist, will you give me some of their business cards and tell me a little about what the problem was.’ That has worked wonderfully.”

Participants emphasized importance of counselors seeking out knowledge of resources, policies, referral agencies, and the like. The information was available, but it was only through the conscious decision to ask questions and learn more that they acquired an understanding of available resources.

Participants also identified consultation as instrumental to their development of the knowledge necessary to successfully advocate for their students. Consultation with math and reading coaches, school psychologists, and school social workers all contributed to the participants’ knowledge base. According to Clara:

I had to really listen to things that aren’t my area of expertise at all. I have nothing to do with reading. I read with the kids for bibliotherapy, but otherwise, I don’t teach reading. It’s still important that I know that information. So, really working with the
reading coach, and the math coach . . . I really had to count on those people to teach me what I needed to know, and I continue to use [them], especially the math coach. As we get new assessment tools, I’ve had to really focus on their help in order to be an effective communicator with math.

The study participants also emphasized consulting with other counselors in similar settings. By communicating and conferring with other professionals, the participants learned from their expertise, experience, and mistakes.

Anne, Barbara, and Clara all cited professional development as important to the acquisition of knowledge. Participation in professional learning communities or teams (PLTs) and professional organizations were emphasized in particular. According to Barbara:

I started as an elementary counselor, so we would meet in regions . . . . Our group was strong where if someone sent an email asking about resources or how to handle a certain situation, people responded . . . and now, since I’ve been in middle school, I’ve been with a really good PLT.

In-service workshops and conferences were also cited as facilitating the participants’ acquisition of advocacy knowledge. Participants learned of specific school policies and parameters as well as available resources through these types of professional development.

Skills

The school counselors included in this study stressed the importance of experience in their development of the skills necessary for effective advocacy as well as knowledge. Clara stressed how she benefitted from the variety of her experiences in both middle and
elementary school settings as well as the diversity of the middle school where she worked.

She stated:

My first school was a middle school in Durham, and it had two totally different populations. One was low SES and one was higher SES and middle class and those parents, like helicopter parents, they were always around and the other parents, I dealt with their kids a lot too, lots of calls to DSS and things like that. So they both challenged me. . . . I think all those experiences really led me to challenge my skills for sure. It helped me to learn what I was good at and what I was not. It also helped me, with the helicopter parents, to please them but also tell them no, and that’s really hard personality-wise, but over the years it’s gotten easier. So I think working with both types of families, they were both challenging, but it helped me to have the skills I have today.

Working with people of different backgrounds and cultures taught the participants a variety of skills. When asked what she would include in a program to teach advocacy skills to counseling students, Clara said:

I would include, definitely, how to be an advocate with different types of people. There are different skill sets of being an advocate toward administrators, toward teachers, and toward parents. Defining those skill sets would be important and distinguishing between each other because some of them are going to overlap and some of them are going to be really different. What will work with parents and what will work with administrators are not going to be the same thing.
Clara’s variety of experiences enabled her to learn to advocate both for and to different populations. She went on to say, “I’d want to make sure I understood who I was advocating for, culturally as well as socioeconomically because I want to make sure that I understand those differences.” With experience, the participants learned to differentiate and select the best methods and skills for a particular population.

Another skill set that comes with counseling experience is how to work within the inherent bureaucracy in schools. According to Anne, “It’s like any other young professional, you go out and you’re fighting windmills. You go out, and you’re not effective. You have to learn that there’s bureaucracy in schools and you have to learn how to work with that bureaucracy in order to help a student.” According to the study participants, experience enabled them to develop these skills.

As with knowledge, study participants expressed that they made conscious decisions to develop the skills necessary for effective advocacy. Once they made the decision, they then obtained the skills through professional development. In-service trainings provided by schools, mentoring classes, the process of applying for National Board Certification as well as workshops and conferences were all mentioned as important skill builders. Clara identified areas in which she was weak and then pursued professional development opportunities to address those areas. She said, “Working with parents is now really easy for me, but as a new counselor, it was not. . . . I went to professional development on communication . . . some parent workshops . . . so that I could really get better at it . . . then I would come back and practice what I learned.” According to participants, advocacy skill
development is an ongoing process. Barbara gives the following advice to school counseling students:

Once you finish graduate school, understand that it’s important to stay within your professional organization, because those are a lot of resources to help you grow as a counselor, and when you attend workshops you learn a lot of skills. So, you need to constantly be in a situation where you’re learning things, and understand that it doesn’t stop with graduate school.

Part of the ongoing process of building advocacy skills is self-reflection. Clara was able to reflect on her skills and know where she needed improvement. It is important, according to the participants, to know yourself and your personality, to know what works and what is not effective for you. It is also important to learn from your mistakes. As Barbara says, “Like anybody, you make a mistake, but looking back to reflect on, okay, how could I have handled that situation differently.” Study participants each talked about self-reflection and knowing their own personality and who they are as a person. The more they knew about themselves, the easier it was to determine what their skills were and where they were lacking. Through self-reflection they discovered where they needed to improve, and then sought consultation or professional development in those areas. This also facilitated discovery of what worked for their personalities.

The participants also identified the relationships they built with students as contributing to their development of advocacy skills. According to the participants, if counselors develop a relationship with students, they know what the student needs are and
what approaches are best in advocating for them. Developing relationships with those whom they attempt to influence as advocates is also important. Knowing the administrators, teachers, and parents they work with helps them select the best advocacy approaches. According to Clara, “It’s important to feel it out, because whenever you’re advocating for a student, you can advocate too hard and turn somebody off, and then you can advocate not enough and have them not hear what you’re trying to say.” Participants stated that building relationships with students as well as other stakeholders helps them plan their advocacy efforts and know which skills to use.

Each participant also emphasized the importance of role models and mentors to the development of advocacy skills. Barbara said, “Being around other people who possessed knowledge that I needed to improve my own. I think as counselors, a lot of us, especially those within our PLT, we’re good about just calling each other and asking questions.” Access to experienced counselors was fundamental to all of the participants’ development. Barbara also said:

When I did my student teaching, and then when I did supervision as a counselor, I was paired with somebody who was really good, somebody who I still admire and talk to. Then after that I had a really good mentor who I still keep in contact with like 14 or some years later. So being able to have conversations, watching the things that they did, and adapting what will work best for me as a counselor.

Participants emphasized role models and mentors as facilitating their development of skills and spoke about the importance of mentors for new school counselors. Clara said:
It’s difficult as a new school counselor coming in, especially at the elementary school level, you’re the only one. So, working on your own, if you don’t already have [advocacy] ingrained in you, then it’s really going to be difficult to know what it’s supposed to look like, what you’re supposed to do as an advocate. I think learning from other school counselors is key. Also, it has to be at your school because if you’re an advocate at a different school, school climates are so different from school to school, what works at one school is not going to work at another school.

**Summary**

The interview questions were separated into the three advocacy competency domains. Participants emphasized experience as a primary mode of development in all three domains. Conscious decision-making led to the development of dispositions and knowledge while professional development was instrumental in building knowledge and skill sets. Participants thought that dispositions were to some degree innate while advocacy knowledge and skills could be further developed through self-reflection, consultation with others in the school setting, and observing role models and mentors successfully advocating for students.

**Promoting School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies**

The participants identified several themes promoting professional school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies. The degree of impact a situation poses for the individual or group of students was noted as well as counselors’ awareness of the social-ecological context of students’ lives. Participants encouraged new school counselors to take small steps when starting out. According to the data, administrators’ accurate understanding
of the role of school counselors facilitated counselors’ ability to advocate for students, as did the counselors’ ability to advocate for themselves and the appropriate use of their time. Self-reflection, professional development, and internships all helped counselors develop advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

Participants indicated critical cases and situations involving greater degrees of impact promoted the development of advocacy competencies. When a situation was compelling, the participants stated, they were driven to seek out and acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to advocate for a student. The number of students impacted was an important factor, as was whether the situation would affect students’ views of themselves for the rest of their lives. Examples of critical cases cited by participants were elementary students facing grade retention and middle school students being suspended. All of the participants emphasized the need to consistently do what is best for their students.

Study participants also stressed a counselor’s awareness of the social-ecological context of students’ lives. According to Anne, “You’re working with a child, with the whole child and it’s not necessarily just while they’re here at school. They are what their parents are raising and what the home environment offers them, or doesn’t offer them.” Anne believed that home visits are beneficial as they help counselors to see the child in their home environment and understand the child’s perspective and the family as a whole. Anne also emphasized the usefulness of a family circle activity she does with her students in the sixth grade. Students are asked to put themselves as a point anywhere inside a circle on a piece of paper. They are then instructed to place the other people in their life somewhere on the
paper. According to Anne, the family circle activity “really helps [a counselor] understand from the child’s perspective what’s going on [in their family].” Keeping the context of students’ lives in mind helps counselors understand the whole child and thus impacts their ability to advocate for that child.

Participants recommended that counselors take small steps when first starting as a new counselor or when entering a new school. Clara said, “I could not imagine as a new counselor choosing some huge thing to advocate for because it can be completely overwhelming and you won’t learn anything because you’ll be so lost doing it you won’t really do a good job advocating and you won’t do a good job learning for yourself.” Barbara also emphasized taking small steps to gradually build advocacy competencies. She said, “I think you can get overwhelmed starting off as a counselor, or going into a new school, if you’re trying to do everything at one time.” According to the study participants, new counselors are best served to build their advocacy efforts over time and learn as they go.

All of the participants stressed the importance of administrators having an accurate understanding of the role of the school counselor. Anne emphasized the importance of educating school and district level administrators about the value of school counselors, what they are trained to do, and the skills they have to offer. When administrators understand and hold a positive view of the counselor, the counselor’s role is strengthened as is their ability to advocate. Many districts are utilizing the ASCA National Model and the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation process to provide evidence of counselors’ effectiveness to administrators, facilitating counselors’ ability to advocate for students.
Barbara and Clara both stressed the importance of professional development and continuing to grow throughout one’s career. They mentioned specific examples of professional development such as in-service workshops provided by the school, NCSCA and ASCA conferences, as well as PLT participation. Clara stated, “I think part of being an advocate too is being up-to-date. . . attending conferences, learning more. . . . I have to be sure that I read the journals; I have to go to the conferences.”

Part of what makes professional development important is the opportunity to network and consult with other school counselors. As Barbara said:

They [counselors] really do need to make it a priority to collaborate with other people in a similar role. Sometimes counselors are isolated within the school if you’re at a smaller school or an elementary school. But I think it’s important to talk to other people within that profession to share, this is how we do things, this is how we handle this situation, this is what I did when I was in that situation.

Consultation, according to the participants, was fundamental to developing their advocacy competencies.

Participants cited internships as the primary means for student counselors to gain the experience necessary for developing advocacy competencies. According to Anne, “You’re not going to understand what the possibilities are unless you are in an internship where you see that working. . . . I think internships are very, very important for the young person, the new person, to see what all a counselor can do.” Internships enable new counselors to witness effective advocates at work, giving them the opportunity to see what successful advocacy
looks like. Participants also emphasized internships as a means for counseling students to work with real students and families. Anne said, “The more opportunities that counselors have to come face to face and get to know the kids the more likely they’ll be able to be advocates for those students. And they’ll get to know the students better.” Internships help new counselors learn to develop rapport with students and to choose appropriate advocacy strategies.

All participants talked at length about the importance of building relationships with students. The two middle school counselors, Anne and Barbara, both follow their students through the grade levels, working with each student in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade consecutively. They perceived this as a means of building relationships with students so they really understood them, their needs, and how to best advocate for them. “I follow the students. I start with them in sixth grade and I move up every year so I’ve got a good handle on who my students are and what kinds of trouble they’ve already been in and where they are academically, who needs the support,” said Barbara. Anne also stressed the importance of leading small groups, noting that groups were really where counselors got to know students and formed relationships.

All of the participants stressed the importance of knowing the students for successful advocacy. Barbara said:

Once you come to some level ground, and understand who that student is . . . you can advocate for them better. I may think I know what you need, but unless I’ve taken the
time to really talk to you and get to know you, what I think and what is true may be a little different.

In order to make choices about appropriate resources and appropriate advocacy methods, counselors need to know the people for whom they advocate.

Anne and Barbara both stressed the importance of being visible in the school building as a means of getting to know the students. According to Anne, “The more you’re involved, the more likely or the faster you’re going to get a picture of what’s going on with that child.” Being present in the halls and cafeteria and letting students and teachers see the counselor and interact with them helps counselors gather information about their students. “Watching students in the cafeteria or watching them interact at the lockers. It’s amazing, different things they say or the way they act, comments from teachers. . . . There’s all kinds of things you can get just from walking through [the school],” said Anne. Getting out of the office and around the school helps build rapport with teachers as well as students. Anne said, “Too often counselors just sit in their office. They can’t do that, they need to be seen out in the halls, teachers need to see them as part of their team.” Anne felt that counseling students need to learn that teachers are part of the team as well. She said, “Teachers are so good about picking out the kids that something is going on, something’s different, something’s not just right. They’re really good at that, and they’ll let you know.” Teachers can provide a wealth of information about students and help counselors know how to advocate for those students. Barbara said, “When I'm out and about, sometimes I can pick up things if something’s brewing, so that way I can be more effective.”
Participants also spoke of counselors’ own self-advocacy skills as a feature promoting the development of other advocacy competencies. Barbara said school counselors must:

Learn to advocate for themselves to make sure they’re not spending too much time in one area and not enough time in another area. Because, if you’re doing all these other things, but yet your student contact is very minimal, I mean, how effective really are you being?

According to study participants, counselors that are able to advocate for themselves are in a better position to advocate for their students.

Finally, the ability to plan and prepare for advocacy efforts facilitates counselors’ development of advocacy competencies. Citing an example of being ill-prepared, Clara stated, “I rushed everything. I was like, oh my gosh, you’re pregnant; we need to go and tell your mom today. We could have waited over the weekend, maybe plan a little bit better.” She went on to say that being prepared, having some background knowledge and tools to use might have made a difference in how effective she was in advocating for the student.

The data revealed numerous themes contributing to counselors’ successful advocacy efforts and further development of advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Building relationships with students, considering the degree of impact a situation poses, bearing in mind the social-ecological context of students’ lives, and engaging in self-reflection help counselors understand what knowledge and skills are required for an advocacy effort. Once the additional competencies are identified, counselors can then acquire them by planning and preparing for advocacy and seeking out professional development. Small steps for new
counselors, administrators’ accurate understanding of the counselor’s role and the counselor’s self-advocacy skills also enable the development of advocacy competencies.

**Hindrances to School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies**

The study participants identified certain features that hinder professional school counselors’ development of advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Nice counselor syndrome, administrators’ misunderstanding of the counselor’s role, counselor and teacher attitudes, and rigid school policies were major themes that emerged from the data. Participants shared their personal experiences as well as the experiences of other counselors battling these factors that impede advocacy.

Clara identified certain aspects of her personality that hindered her development of the advocacy competencies. “I am a really nice person, so a lot of times, I would share what I needed to share, but not in an authoritative way, in more of a passive way.” Bemak and Chung (2008) describe this as the “nice counselor syndrome” (NCS). Clara described herself further:

I’m still a people pleaser. So I will say yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, and then I’ll say no when I really need to. Sometimes when advocating, if I don’t feel really strongly about something, I’m more passive. That is a hindrance. That is my biggest hindrance.

This desire to please others and continue to be seen as a nice person and not offend or upset the balance is a hindering factor for many counselors.
The study participants also emphasized administrators’ misunderstanding of the school counselor’s role as a limiting aspect. According to participants, administrators often do not understand the role of the counselor, making it difficult to advocate successfully for students. Anne said, “I think administrators not realizing what counselors can do and not realizing the skills we have to offer. . . . Just administrators not understanding and appreciating what the counselors can do.” Often this misunderstanding of the skills counselors possess leads to assignment of administrative tasks and extra duties such as test coordinator and Academically Gifted (AG) coordinator. “I think the biggest hindrance has been the extra duty. I was a testing coordinator for nine years and the AG coordinator. [I have held] every coordinator position in the school. . . That’s taken away from what I trained to do and what I wanted to do,” said Anne.

The study participants all felt they were fortunate to currently work with supportive administrators. According to Barbara:

To have a good program you really need to have supportive administrators who support counselors and understand what counselors do. I didn’t experience it as an elementary counselor because I had an administrator who was very knowledgeable about what my role was, but I know in talking with other counselors sometimes they’ve found themselves being the one to chair SST or to the be the testing coordinator or to cover a class if a teacher was out.

Clara expressed similar sentiments. She worked with a range of administrator support and found that supportive administrators favorably impacted her ability to advocate for students.
“I think [school counselors] also need a supportive administration or a supportive staff that believes in the role of the school counselor. I’ve been lucky in that two of the three schools I’ve worked at, they really valued the school counselor. . . . If they value you, then you automatically can use your role as an advocate pretty well.”

Administrators’ inaccurate understanding of the role of counselors and assignment of extra duties leads to counselors having reduced time for advocacy and advocacy development. According to Barbara:

There are so many things to do and so little time. When you look at the ASCA National Model, they have all the different objectives that you should cover. But you know, our time is split between responsive services, systems report, and guidance curriculum. In an ideal world some of the suggested things would be great, but no one factors in the hall duty or the lunch duty or coverage or just things that come out of the blue.

The size of counselors’ case loads also limits the amount of time they have for each student. Barbara stated, “Some counselors just carry a large caseload. Reducing the student-counselor ratio would be helpful.” Barbara currently carries a case load of 350 students, but has had as many as 370 in the past. Anne currently has over 500 students on her case load. She said, “Over 500 students, that’s a big case load, that’s a lot of kids to keep up with.” The number of students for which counselors are responsible leaves little time for advocacy efforts or further development of advocacy competencies.
Each of the study participants also stressed attitudes as a hindrance. Counselor attitudes and teacher attitudes were both discussed. Some counselors do not have the dispositions necessary for effective advocacy. According to Barbara, “Some people, their personalities may hinder them from doing as much.” Teacher attitudes also hampered the participants’ advocacy on behalf of students. Clara said:

Sometimes teachers’ personalities. . . or their philosophy as well. Like for positive behavior support, some teachers’ philosophies are, ‘I’m not going to reward a student for things that they should be doing already.’ Advocating for that with those particular teachers is really difficult because it’s really going against everything they believe in with classroom discipline.

In these situations, according to the participants, you can advocate for students, but if teachers are not on board or will not cooperate, your efforts will not be successful.

Barbara also mentioned school policies as an occasional hindrance, especially those policies that are particularly rigid. In these cases, counselors can experience difficulty advocating for a student while working within the school’s rules. Recalling a student for whom she tried to advocate against long-term suspension she observed, “I know students make bad mistakes, and you have to follow rules and things, but I know for her, to not be in school and just be out on the street for so long where there’s more stuff [was harmful].”

According to participants, the rigidity of school policies can hinder advocacy efforts whereas consideration of certain rules on a case-by-case basis may actually facilitate advocacy efforts.
The data revealed both internal and external features that hamper professional school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies. Nice counselor syndrome and counselor attitudes occur within the counselor and can be shaped toward advocacy dispositions. Administrator views, teacher attitudes, and school policies, however, occur externally and can only be modified through advocacy efforts.

In conclusion, the three award-winning school counselor participants identified themselves as advocates for their students who grew into the advocacy role over time. Through experience, self-reflection, conscious decision-making, consultation, and professional development they acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for effective advocacy. Despite the hindrances encumbering many school counselors’ abilities to advocate and further develop advocacy competencies, participants were confident that through carefully planned advocacy efforts, the various hindrances could be overcome and that all counselors with the innate disposition toward student advocacy could become effective advocates.
Chapter 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine how effective school counselor advocates developed the advocacy competencies necessary for successful advocacy for students and their families. The research questions were: How do school counselors develop advocacy competencies? What do school counselors perceive as promoting the development of school counselor advocacy competencies? and What do school counselors perceive as hindering the development of school counselor advocacy competencies?

The study used a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the research questions. The multiple case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of effective school counselor advocates and the specific means through which they developed Brown and Trusty’s (2005) advocacy competencies. Retrospective interviews examined the phenomenological experiences of three award-winning school counselors with developing advocacy competencies. The study shed light on the development of advocacy competencies through the counselors’ own descriptions of how they became effective advocates for students and their families.

**Development of Advocacy Competencies**

The professional school counselors in the present study emphasized experience, making conscious decisions, role models and mentors, and professional development as contributing to their development of the dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective advocacy. In describing their personal experiences with developing advocacy
competencies, participants also stressed consultation with other counselors, self-reflection, and building relationships with students, parents, and school staff. These findings affirm those of previous studies (Kircher, 2007; Pennymon, 2005; Ratts, 2006) to indicate a need for further inclusion of advocacy competencies in training programs for new school counselors and professional development for practicing counselors.

**Dispositions**

Brown and Trusty (2005) identified four dispositions, or personal characteristics, of counselors that lead to effective advocacy. The dispositions described by Brown and Trusty include an advocacy disposition, family support/empowerment disposition, social advocacy disposition, and an ethical disposition. The advocacy disposition refers to a counselor’s recognition and appreciation of the advocacy role. A family support/empowerment disposition describes the awareness that parents and guardians are the best advocates for their students. Counselors exhibiting this disposition join parents and empower them to advocate for their children. The social advocacy disposition is defined by an extension of advocacy beyond the individual student to all people as well as the counseling profession, whereas an ethical disposition enables a counselor to value the professional code of ethics and analyze situations according to ethical principles.

Participants exhibited and discussed all four dispositions identified by Brown and Trusty. Each of the participants valued their advocacy role and possessed a well-developed advocacy disposition. The participants all discussed working with parents to advocate for children, displaying the family support/empowerment disposition. Barbara and Clara both
discussed the importance of advocating for the school counseling profession, indicating social advocacy dispositions. The ethical disposition was evident in that participants referred to consistently promoting what is in the best interest of students. While participants believed they innately possessed these dispositions prior to becoming counselors, they thought it was through experience and conscious decisions to take an advocacy stance that they further developed those innate dispositions.

**Knowledge**

Brown and Trusty (2005) identified specific knowledge competencies that enable school counselors to effectively advocate for students. These include what counselors know about resources, parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change. Counselors’ knowledge of resources includes resources within the school as well as the community and include people, agencies, and programs that benefit students and their families. Knowledge of parameters includes school policies and the legal rights of students and families. Counselors’ knowledge of dispute resolution mechanisms refers to mediation and conflict resolution strategies. Familiarity with advocacy models gives direction to counselors’ advocacy efforts, while an understanding of systems change enables counselors to address the various subsystems affecting students.

Study participants described their development of advocacy knowledge emphasizing experience, conscious decision-making, consultation, and professional development opportunities. Participants shared that it was only through experience that they were able to learn the parameters or policies of a particular school system and school. Anne, Barbara, and
Clara also expressed the importance of experience in increasing their knowledge of available resources. Conscious decision-making was instrumental in their development of resource knowledge as well. Participants often became aware of gaps in their knowledge of resources and sought out consultation or professional development to address those gaps. According to study participants, counselors can learn school and school system parameters and resources through in–service trainings and other professional development workshops. Attending professional development and being active in professional organizations also provides opportunities for consultation with experienced professionals. The participants did not discuss knowledge of dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, or systems change.

Skills

Brown and Trusty (2005) identified specific skills that contribute to effective school counselor advocacy as well. These skills competencies refer to what counselors are able to do. Communication skills of empathy and reflective listening and the ability to communicate problems and solutions to others are included in the skill competencies. Collaboration skills are also incorporated as counselors must build partnerships with administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the community to advocate effectively. Other skills include problem-assessment and problem-solving as well as organizational skills. Finally, self-care skills are included in this domain of advocacy competencies as the risks and consequences posed by advocacy efforts are stressful and can lead to counselor burnout.

Study participants identified experience as the primary means through which they developed advocacy skills. This supports Field’s (2002) finding that counselors with six or
more years experience reported more advocacy behaviors than counselors with less experience. Increased advocacy behaviors are a result of additional experience and seem to indicate greater development of advocacy skills.

Participants also cited professional development and self-reflection as instrumental to their developing advocacy skills. Professional development workshops, PLTs, and in-service trainings enabled them to learn the additional skills they needed to effectively advocate for students. Engaging in self-reflection helped participants identify the skills they lacked so they could then seek professional development opportunities to acquire them.

Study participants stressed the importance of building relationships in developing advocacy skills. Relationships with students and parents enabled them to understand the needs of students and identify the most appropriate means by which to advocate. Relationships with administrators, teachers, and school staff members also helped participants choose the best advocacy methods and skill sets to use, enabling them to identify skills they lacked and seek those out. These findings echo those of Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon (2010). Singh et al. constructed a grounded theory for school counselor advocacy and used semi-structured interviews to identify strategies employed by effective advocates. Among the strategies identified was building intentional relationships. Experience in building these relationships helps counselors develop their communication, collaboration, and problem assessment and problem-solving skills.

Role models and mentors also facilitated the study participants’ development of advocacy skills. Observing effective advocates enabled the participants to learn from their
experience and their mistakes. Seeing how experienced advocates communicate and watching them collaborate with various stakeholders helped the participants develop those skills.

Study participants also emphasized the importance of consultation. Consulting with other counselors helped the participants learn additional advocacy skills. Consultation, however, is affected by collaboration skills. Thus, building collaboration skills not only contributes to the formation of partnerships with administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the community, but also enables counselors involved in the collaboration to acquire additional skills by requesting consultation. Collaboration, therefore, is both a skill and a skill-builder.

The findings of this study support those of several studies focusing on the current state of advocacy training for school counselors (Kircher, 2007; Pennymon, 2005; Ratts, 2006). Those studies found that despite the consensus on the importance of including advocacy skills in counselor training, it is largely missing from graduate training programs. According to Bemak and Chung (2005), “Advocacy is markedly absent from most graduate school counseling training curricula, and social change, social reform, and school reform are not typically discussed at all” (p. 199). None of the participants in the present study cited graduate training as a source of advocacy competence.

Pennymon (2005) examined school counselors’ perceptions of helpful and hindering events in a master’s level training program and found disparities between teaching advocacy theory and the counselors’ ability to implement advocacy skills in a school setting. The
study also found that the program’s mission statement, philosophy, and training model did not focus on advocacy. Ratts (2006) also explored advocacy training in counselor preparation programs. The study found only a moderate emphasis on advocacy competencies and observed that advocacy efforts were focused on microlevel (individual student) interventions rather than systems level advocacy. Ratts recommended that advocacy competencies be further incorporated into counselor training through the creation of advocacy counseling specific textbooks and courses. Kircher (2007), on the other hand, examined the perceptions of school counselor educators of the importance of including the advocacy competencies (dispositions, knowledge, and skills) in master’s level training programs. The study assessed the extent to which the competencies were taught in the program and the ability of program graduates to apply the advocacy competencies. Kircher concluded that while counselor educators perceived the advocacy competencies to be appropriate for inclusion, additional focus is needed to ensure that all graduates are able to apply the competencies.

The literature also suggests that counselors should be trained to work on a system level in addition to the specific training counselors receive in working with individual students and clients. “School counseling students can learn how to restructure school environments in ways that promote positive youth development . . . [They] can be purposefully trained in advocacy and leadership skills that alter systemic functions” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 202). According to Ratts (2006), advocacy training efforts were focused on microlevel interventions rather than systems level advocacy. Furthermore, Anne, Barbara,
and Clara did not speak of advocacy on a systems level, indicating that systems level training
may be missing entirely from preparation programs and professional development.

The experiences of the school counselors in this study support the existing research
on counselor advocacy training. The study’s findings also provide a fuller understanding of
how advocacy competencies might be promoted in school counseling students as well as
practicing school counselors. Increasing school counselor access to factors that contribute to
advocacy competence and limiting the factors that hinder advocacy efforts will facilitate
professional school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies necessary for
effective advocacy.

Promoting School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies

The three award-winning school counselors involved in this study identified several
themes promoting counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies. The degree of
impact a situation poses for the individual or group of students, counselors’ awareness of the
social-ecological context of students’ lives, and administrators’ accurate understanding of the
school counselor’s role all facilitated counselors’ ability to advocate for students. Self-
reflection, professional development, and counselor’s ability to plan and prepare for
advocacy efforts also helped develop advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

Participants cited the degree of impact posed by a student’s situation as an aspect
promoting their development of advocacy competencies. Critical cases and situations
potentially affecting students long-term spurred them to act and to seek out the advocacy
competencies they lacked in order to help the student. The needs of the students dictated when and how participants advocated.

Study participants emphasized counselor awareness of the social-ecological context of students as well. Traditionally, the focus of school counseling was on the individual student and ignored the context and environment in which students live. A student’s environment is frequently the source of his or her problems, however. Therefore, in order to adequately serve students, school counselors must design interventions to include students’ home and school environments. This supports Lee’s (1998) conclusion that “problematic behavior can often be traced to the negative effects of environment on cognitive and affective functioning” (p. 5). According to Anne, home visits and family circle activities help her understand her student’s home environment, giving her information to plan and prepare for advocacy efforts and seek additional knowledge and skills if necessary. This awareness of the social-ecological context of students’ lives is similar to the social advocacy disposition defined by Brown and Trusty (2005) in its extension of the focus of counseling beyond the individual student.

Despite participants’ support for this disposition, no participants offered discussion of systems level change. While they clearly valued the importance of knowing the systems affecting a student, they did not speak of addressing or changing these systems, only understanding them. The absence of discussion of system level advocacy may be an indicator of the heightened consequences and risks associated with this type of advocacy.
Counselors that engage in systems level advocacy may be unpopular, and therefore not typically awarded Counselor of the Year awards and recognitions.

Anne, Barbara, and Clara all stressed the importance of administrators’ accurate understanding of the role of school counselors. According to the participants, when administrators understand what counselors can and should be doing in the school, they are supportive of counselors’ advocacy efforts. The participants echoed the literature in suggesting that school and school system administrators receive more information about the role of the counselor. Singh et al. (2010) identified educating others as one of the strategies used by advocates. Bemak (2000) stated, “The job description for school counselors must be redefined to align effectively with national and state educational objectives” (p. 323). Clarification of the role of counselors in the schools comes through educating others about that role. In order to promote the positive development of all students and narrow the achievement gap, the school counselor’s role must shift toward advocacy and be underpinned by administrative support.

The participants identified self-reflection as a practice that promotes the development of advocacy competencies. The advocacy model literature also supports the practice of self-reflection. Eriksen’s (1997) seven-stage advocacy model begins with counselor exploration of their professional identity, confidence, and stability in personal beliefs. The model suggests that in order to advocate effectively, counselors must be confident in their professional identity and belief systems. Brown and Trusty’s (2005) best practices integration of Svec, Eriksen, and Fiedler’s advocacy models recommends that counselors
understand their professional identity in regards to advocacy dispositions. The findings of the present study suggest this understanding is best gained through self-reflection.

The participants continuously emphasized professional development as contributing to their development of the advocacy competencies. The literature, however, suggests that advocacy skills are largely missing from professional development for practicing counselors. “In-service training is a reflection of the defined role of school counselors, and markedly absent from in-service workshops are sessions related to social equity, leadership skills, or advocacy” (Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 199). Study participants may have indirectly learned advocacy skills from professional development experiences. The participants have presented at conferences and taken leadership roles in professional development and professional organizations, indicating that leadership roles also provided experiences that facilitated participants’ development of advocacy competencies.

The participants echoed the theoretical literature’s emphasis on planning and preparing for advocacy efforts. Eriksen’s (1997) advocacy model centers on planning and preparation. According to Eriksen, the problem should be identified and described using language that inspires action. Next, counselors should assess resources and determine the human and material resources that must be used in the advocacy effort. According to Eriksen, advocates then strategically plan the advocacy effort and train those involved. Then, counselors take action and implement the plan. In Brown and Trusty’s (2005) best practices integration of Svec, Eriksen, and Fiedler’s advocacy models, they recommend that counselors gather and use data and resources to develop a specific action plan. By taking the
time to plan and prepare for an advocacy effort, counselors are able to identify necessary knowledge and skills and seek out those they lack, further developing their advocacy competencies.

Counselor self-advocacy skills, according to participants, also aid school counselors’ development of advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Specifically, counselors that are able to advocate for themselves and the appropriate use of their time are more effective advocates. If a counselor spends the majority of his or her time carrying out administrative or clerical tasks and focusing on extra duties, he or she will be unable to develop advocacy competencies. The findings of this study further support the incorporation of advocacy competencies into counselor training programs and professional development.

**Hindrances to School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies**

The effective school counselor advocates in this study identified certain features that stifle counselors’ development of advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills. The difficulties participants experienced reflected those identified in the literature such as nice counselor syndrome, administrators’ misunderstanding of the counselor’s role, counselor and teacher attitudes, and rigid school policies. The ways in which the study participants overcame these obstacles provide insights to other school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies.

Clara expressed Bemak and Chung’s (2008) “nice counselor syndrome” (NCS) as a hindrance that she overcame to further develop her advocacy competencies. According to Bemak and Chung, “These counselors live up to their reputation by the manner in which they
consistently strive to promote harmony with others while avoiding and deflecting interpersonal conflicts in the school setting” (p. 374). Counselors exhibiting NCS, like Clara, are well-meaning and nice people. Their concern with preserving their reputation and others’ perception of them, however, prevents their taking an advocacy stance and potentially disrupting the equilibrium. “In order to be effective social justice advocates school counselors must reject the nice counselor syndrome” (Bemak & Chung, 2008). Clara was able to overcome NCS through self-reflection and recognition of this aspect of her personality. She then observed a role model and mentor and sought professional development to improve her communication skills. Other counselors observing the characteristics of NCS within themselves can make the conscious decision to change and become stronger advocates for their students.

Just as administrators’ accurate understanding of the role of school counselors facilitates counselors’ development of advocacy competencies, administrators’ misunderstanding the role of counselors hinders their advocacy efforts. The participants, while all currently working with supportive administrators, shared prior personal experiences and those of other counselors with this limiting factor. This finding correlates with those of Bemak (2000), “many schools still define school counselors as positions rather than programs, emphasize maintenance and administrative tasks, and accentuate a clinical rather than educational focus” (p. 324). Shaeffer (2009) also found that the value school administrators place on advocacy directly impacts school counselors’ use of advocacy. Administrators’ confusion about the role of school counselors has led to ineffective
definitions of counselors’ duties and an inefficient use of their time and talents. The present study also found that additional job responsibilities and insufficient time were serious obstacles to advocacy, supporting Field and Baker’s (2004) conclusions that the assignment of administrative tasks and extra duties limits school counselors’ ability to advocate for students and their families.

Participants also described negative counselor and teacher attitudes as barriers. Counselor attitudes that undervalue or fail to incorporate the dispositions necessary for effective advocacy prevent counselors from taking an advocacy stance and pursuing advocacy competencies and efforts. Teacher attitudes, on the other hand, can hinder counselors’ efforts in advocating for their students. While participants did not speak of systems level change, the literature suggests that the school environment can be changed to maximize student achievement and development though advocacy. Other members of the school need to be receptive to these changes, however, for counselor advocacy efforts to succeed. Predominate counter-advocacy attitudes can lead to counselor burn-out and cynicism, preventing counselors from further developing the advocacy competencies necessary for effective advocacy.

Finally, study participants emphasized rigid school policies as a hindrance to their advocacy efforts. Participants suggested consideration of certain rules on a case-by-case basis as a means to best serve students. According to the literature, it is imperative that counselors support policies that consider the social-ecological context of students’ lives and
work to modify existing policies to create an environment that contributes to students’ well-being and academic success (Lee, 1998; Menacker, 1976).

The results of the present study identified obstacles school counselors face in their development of advocacy competencies. The findings also supported previously identified hindrances. By focusing on these hindrances, school counselors and school counselor educators can minimize their effects.

**Limitations**

Potential limitations of the study include threats to credibility and transferability. The researcher’s teaching experience and status as a school counseling student and provisionally-licensed school counselor introduced potential bias as well. Multiple steps were taken, however, (i.e., triangulation, member checks, and bracketing) to reduce the potential threats to reliability and validity. Meanwhile, the researcher’s experience in the setting is also a strength, facilitating understanding of the context.

In addition, the small sample size inherently limited the diversity of the sample. Thus, the sample was not representative of the entire population of school counselors, and the study can only be generalized to other similar populations. These limitations, however, are typical of qualitative research.

Another limitation of the study is the sample selection method. Advocates are rarely popular. Therefore, school counselors that are the most outspoken advocates for their students may not win Counselor of the Year recognitions and awards. According to the literature, there are often consequences associated with taking an advocacy stance. “There is
often a high price to pay for being an activist, including feeling emotionally drained, being viewed as a troublemaker, placing your job in jeopardy, and becoming the target of backlash from colleagues and harassment from intolerant individuals” (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001, p. 393). The potential for developing a reputation as a troublemaker can lead to disciplinary action from superiors or limited opportunities for career advancement as well as ostracism by colleagues (Lee, 1998). Choosing a population of award winning counselors, while demonstrative of their efficacy, may have eliminated the most outspoken advocates.

Despite these limitations, this study furthers the school counseling profession’s understanding of the advocacy competencies and their development by school counselors. The study adds to the existing body of knowledge and will lead to further research on the most effective means of facilitating school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies and their ability to advocate for students, promoting the positive development of all students and increasing equity in schools.

**Implications**

The results of this study indicate that more can be done to prepare students for successful advocacy efforts and to further the development of practicing counselors’ advocacy competencies. In addition, the link between the innate advocacy dispositions of effective school counselor advocates and the development of other advocacy competencies indicates that applicant’s dispositions should be emphasized and evaluated upon admission to graduate training programs. The study’s findings also support proposals in the research literature for how to better prepare school counseling students. According to the study
participants, graduate training programs and professional development opportunities should teach students specific advocacy skills. Singh et al. (2010) recommended that school counselor advocacy preparation programs improve by directly teaching students to utilize the strategies identified in the study: “(a) using political savvy to navigate power structures, (b) consciousness raising, (c) initiating difficult dialogs, (d) building intentional relationships, (e) teaching students self-advocacy skills, (f) using data for marketing, and (g) educating others about the school counselor role of advocate” (p. 138).

In addition to the strategies identified by Singh et al., this study identified self-reflection and consultation as promoting the development of school counselors’ advocacy competencies. Preparation programs and courses designed to teach advocacy competencies can encourage and communicate effective methods of reflection and consultation. According to study participants, consultation skills are both necessary skills for effective advocacy and builders of other skills. Therefore, imparting strong consultation skills may provide a greater return and increase counselors’ advocacy competencies two-fold.

This study also identified the importance of role models and mentors to school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies. This information can be utilized to increase counseling students’ interaction with practicing counselors throughout graduate training programs in addition to during internships. Opportunities to job shadow and network with practicing counselors would increase these interactions.

Study participants emphasized the importance of internships as well, echoing the call in the literature for specific internship assignments. According to Akos and Galassi (2004):
Counseling interns can be required to identify opportunities to advocate for a student (or group of students) and to form an advocacy plan for one of these opportunities. In the process, interns can be instructed about appropriate ways to plan and deliver an advocacy intervention and can implement it under close supervision by faculty and site supervisors. (p. 203)

Anne recommended a similar requirement. She suggested that interns be assigned certain students for whom they must gather information and resources and implement their plan of action for advocacy. These internship assignments would provide students with experience advocating for a student with the help and support of their site and faculty supervisors. In addition, internship placements and experiences across grade levels would facilitate the types of varied experiences emphasized in the present study while internship site supervisors who are effective advocates themselves would further enable students’ to develop advocacy competencies.

The participants’ identification of professional development as a means of building advocacy knowledge and skills points to the importance of teaching school counseling students the value of these opportunities. Graduate training programs can encourage students to attend conferences and workshops while in graduate school and offer incentives to students to participate. Encouraging counselors during their training to be active in professional organizations and conferences can facilitate their development in advocacy competencies while still in school as well as increase their participation once they are practicing counselors, continuing their development of advocacy competencies. The
participants’ emphasis on professional development also provides insight for helping practicing counselors improve their advocacy skills. Study participants recommended in-service trainings, professional development, and PLT activities that teach specific knowledge and skills (i.e., resources, parameters, communication skills, and collaboration skills).

Further research should be conducted on professional school counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies necessary for effective advocacy. Similar studies should be conducted in other states and should include a larger number of participants. Studies identifying effective advocates through other means so that unpopular advocates are included would add important information to the body of knowledge as well.

This study focused on the exceptional case of award-winning school counselors. Investigating the typical case would provide insight as to what advocacy is like for most school counselors and how the typical school counselor is able (or unable) to advocate for students. Focusing on everyday counselors struggling to find ways to advocate for their students would further advance understanding of this important aspect of school counseling.

School counselor advocacy should also be studied in specific contexts and situations. The advocacy competencies and how counselors develop them may differ according to school setting and student population. The development of advocacy competencies may vary when working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth or advocating with and on behalf of minority students. Other potential variations include students appealing long-term suspensions, students facing grade retention, pregnant or parenting students, and students with limited English proficiency. Results from this study and future studies will
continue to describe effective school counselor advocacy and provide insight into professional school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies.
References


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

This consent form is valid November 1, 2010 through November 1, 2011.

Title of Study: Professional School Counselors’ Development of Advocacy Competencies

Principal Investigator: Sarah Dees Fleder
M.S. Student, Counselor Education
Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Counselor Education
sdees@ncsu.edu
(919) 840-8723

Faculty Sponsor: Stanley B. Baker, Ph.D.
Professor of Counselor Education
Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Counselor Education
Stanley_Baker@ncsu.edu
(919) 515-6360

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to examine how effective school counselor advocates developed the advocacy competencies necessary for successful advocacy for students.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, a 30 to 45 minute audio-taped interview, and subsequent brief follow-up interviews by phone as needed. You will also be asked to submit copies of your resume.

Risks
There are no significant foreseeable risks of participation in this study. If at any point during the study you do not feel like discussing any of the questions asked, you may opt to not answer the question(s) and still remain a participant in the study. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time by emailing Sarah Dees Fleder (sdees@ncsu.edu) or Stanley B. Baker (Stanley_Baker@ncsu.edu).
Benefits
This study will further the modern understanding of how school counselors effectively develop the competencies necessary to be successful advocates for their students. The findings from this study will point to effective means of increasing the advocacy competencies of all school counselors.

Confidentiality
You and two other exemplary counselors will be interviewed for this study. While your name and other identifying information will be masked in any reports about the research results, there is a possibility that colleagues may identify your responses. You will be given the opportunity to verify/modify the researcher's interpretation of your interview comments. The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. Individual quotations will be used in reports about the research.

Compensation
You will not receive anything for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Sarah Dees Fleder, at sdees@ncsu.edu, or (919) 840-8723 or the Faculty Sponsor, Stanley B. Baker, at Stanley_Baker@ncsu.edu.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature_______________________________________ Date __________________
Investigator's signature___________________________________ Date _______________
Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Tell me a story about a time that you were particularly effective in advocating for a student.  
   Probes: How did you know that was the right thing to do?

2. How did you develop the personal characteristics, or dispositions, necessary to be an effective advocate?  
   Probes: advocacy dispositions, family support/empowerment dispositions, social advocacy dispositions, and ethical dispositions.

3. How did you develop the knowledge necessary to be an effective advocate?  
   Probes: Resources, parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change.

4. How did you develop the skills necessary to be an effective advocate?  
   Probes: Communication skills, collaboration skills, problem-assessment skills, problem-solving skills, organizational skills, and self-care skills.

5. What factors contributed to your development of the competencies necessary for successful/effective advocacy?  
   Probes: In your school?  In your community?  In your school district?  
   Additional probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

6. What factors hindered your development of the competencies necessary for successful/effective advocacy?  
   Probes: In your school?  In your community?  In your school district?  
   Additional probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

7. What factors prevent other school counselors from developing advocacy competencies?  
   Probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

8. What factors would facilitate other school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies?  
   Probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.
9. If you were designing a program to prepare school counseling students to be effective advocates, what would you do?

10. Tell me a story about a time you were unsuccessful in advocating for a student.
    Probes: Why do you think you struggled? What did you learn from that experience?

11. What has made the difference between successful and unsuccessful advocacy efforts?

12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about becoming an effective advocate?
Appendix C

Interview Guide Development Process

The interview guide consists of 12 questions. Question one is designed to explore participants’ successful advocacy experiences. The purpose of the question is to elicit a description of an advocacy effort that went well. The question is also designed to help the interviewer build rapport with respondents. Question one begins the discussion about effective advocacy practices and the dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary to successfully advocate for students.

Questions two through four are based on Brown and Trusty’s (2005) advocacy competencies. Question two focuses on the first competency domain, dispositions. The goal of this question is to determine how the respondent developed the competency. The probes for question two are based on the specific dispositions Brown and Trusty identify as essential to effective advocacy. Question three concentrates on knowledge, the second competency domain. The purpose of this question is to discover how the respondent developed the knowledge necessary for effective advocacy. The probes for question three are the types of knowledge competencies Brown and Trusty specify. Question four is centered on the third domain, skills, and seeks to ascertain how respondents acquired the skills needed to be an effective advocate. The probes for question four are the particular skills identified by Brown and Trusty.

Questions five through eight focus on the factors identified in the research literature as contributing to or preventing school counselors’ development of the advocacy
competencies. Questions five and six seek to identify factors that helped or hindered the respondents’ own development of the competencies. Questions seven and eight inquire about factors that may help or hinder other counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies. These questions seek to yield richer data by investigating the potential factors from multiple perspectives: respondents’ personal experiences as well as their perceptions of other school counselors’ experiences. The probes for questions five through eight are general categories of applicable factors identified in the research literature (Bemak, 2000; Shaeffer, 2009).

The final four questions of the interview guide are designed to deepen the respondents’ descriptions of their advocacy experiences. The purpose of these questions is to explore the respondents’ most challenging and most successful efforts as well as to determine what they believe made the difference between the two. The goal is for these questions to yield richer data and enable the respondents’ to reflect upon what they have learned from their advocacy experiences.
Appendix D

Expert Evaluation of Interview Guide

Directions: In order to evaluate the following 12 questions for clarity and potential effectiveness, please compare the goals and the questions below. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the evaluation statements by circling your response.

Question One Goal: Question one is designed to explore participants’ successful advocacy experiences. The purpose of the question is to elicit a description of an advocacy effort that went well. The question is also designed to help the interviewer build rapport with respondents. Question one begins the discussion about effective advocacy practices and the dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary to successfully advocate for students.

Question One:
1. Tell me a story about a time that you were particularly effective in advocating for a student.
   Probes: How did you know that was the right thing to do?

Question One Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question Two Goal: Question two focuses on the first of Brown and Trusty’s (2005) advocacy competency domains, dispositions. The goal of the question is to determine how the respondent developed this competency. The probes for the question are based on the specific dispositions Brown and Trusty identify as essential to effective advocacy.

Question Two:
2. How did you develop the personal characteristics, or dispositions, necessary to be an effective advocate?
   Probes: advocacy dispositions, family support/empowerment dispositions, social advocacy dispositions, and ethical dispositions.
**Question Two Evaluation:**
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

**Question Three Goal:** Question three concentrates on knowledge, the second competency domain. The goal of the question is to determine how the respondent developed the knowledge necessary for effective advocacy. The probes for question three are the types of knowledge competencies Brown and Trusty (2005) specify.

**Question Three:**
3. How did you develop the knowledge necessary to be an effective advocate?
   Probes: Resources, parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change.

**Question Three Evaluation:**
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

**Question Four Goal:** Question four is centered on the third advocacy competency domain, skills. The goal of the question is determine how respondents developed the skills needed to be an effective advocate. The probes for question four are the particular skills identified by Brown and Trusty (2005).

**Question Four:**
4. How did you develop the skills necessary to be an effective advocate?
   Probes: Communication skills, collaboration skills, problem-assessment skills, problem-solving skills, organizational skills, and self-care skills.
Question Four Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question Five Goal: Question five seeks to identify specific factors that helped the respondents’ development of the advocacy competencies. The probes for question five are general categories of helpful and hindering factors identified in the research literature (Bemak, 2000; Shaeffer, 2009).

Question Five:
5. What factors contributed to your development of the competencies necessary for successful/effective advocacy?
   Probes: In your school? In your community? In your school district?
   Additional probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

Question Five Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question Six Goal: Question six seeks to identify specific factors that hindered the respondents’ development of the advocacy competencies. The probes for question six are general categories of helpful and hindering factors identified in the research literature (Bemak, 2000; Shaeffer, 2009).
Question Six:
6. What factors hindered your development of the competencies necessary for successful/effective advocacy?
   Probes: In your school? In your community? In your school district?
   Additional probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

Question Six Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.
   1 Strongly Disagree 2 Neither Agree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree
   5

B.) The question meets the stated goal.
   1 Strongly Disagree 2 Neither Agree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree
   5

Question Seven Goal: Question seven inquires about factors that may hinder other counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies. The probes for question seven are general categories of helpful and hindering factors identified in the research literature (Bemak, 2000; Shaeffer, 2009).

Question Seven:
7. What factors prevent other school counselors from developing advocacy competencies?
   Probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

Question Seven Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.
   1 Strongly Disagree 2 Neither Agree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree
   5

B.) The question meets the stated goal.
   1 Strongly Disagree 2 Neither Agree 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree
   5

Question Eight Goal: Question eight inquires about factors that may help other counselors’ development of the advocacy competencies. The probes for question eight are general categories of helpful and hindering factors identified in the research literature (Bemak, 2000; Shaeffer, 2009).
**Question Eight:**
8. What factors would facilitate other school counselors’ development of advocacy competencies?
   Probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, parents, time, roles, etc.

**Question Eight Evaluation:**
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Neither Agree nor Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Neither Agree nor Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

**Questions Nine, Ten, Eleven, and Twelve Goals:** The final four questions of the interview guide are designed to deepen the respondents’ descriptions of their advocacy experiences. The purpose of these questions is to explore the respondents’ most challenging and most successful efforts as well as to determine what they believe made the difference between the two. The hope is that these questions will yield richer data as well as enable the respondents’ to reflect upon what they have learned from their advocacy experiences.

**Question Nine:**
9. If you were designing a program to prepare school counseling students to be effective advocates, what would you do?

**Question Nine Evaluation:**
A.) The question is clear and understandable.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Neither Agree nor Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Neither Agree nor Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

**Question Ten:**
10. Tell me a story about a time you had difficulty advocating for a student.
   Probes: Why do you think you struggled? What did you learn from that experience?
Question Ten Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.
1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.
1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

Question Eleven:
11. What has made the difference between successful and unsuccessful advocacy efforts?

Question Eleven Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.
1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.
1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

Question Twelve:
12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about becoming an effective advocate?

Question Twelve Evaluation:
A.) The question is clear and understandable.
1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree

B.) The question meets the stated goal.
1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree Neither Agree Agree Strongly
Disagree nor Disagree Agree
Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Please provide the following information:

1. Number of years you have been a counselor: ______________

2. Number of years you have been a counselor at your current school: ______________

3. Number of years of Counseling graduate study (please also include years of graduate study beyond your Master’s degree): ______________

4. Your age: ______________

5. Your gender: ______________

6. Your racial group: ______________