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Improving Classroom Guidance Curriculum With *Understanding by Design*



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Hilary Dack, Clare Merlin-Knoblich

Although the American School Counselor Association National Model reflects the importance of high-quality school counseling core curriculum, or classroom guidance, as part of a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors are often challenged by the complexities of designing an effective classroom guidance curriculum. This conceptual paper addresses these challenges by proposing the use of *Understanding by Design*, a research-based approach to curriculum design used widely in K–12 classrooms across the United States and internationally, to strengthen classroom guidance planning. We offer principles for developing a classroom guidance curriculum that yields more meaningful and powerful lessons, makes instruction more cohesive, and focuses on what is critical for student success.

Keywords: school counseling, school counselor, classroom guidance, school counseling core curriculum, *Understanding by Design*

In comprehensive school counseling programs, school counselors use a range of approaches to support students' academic achievement, social and emotional growth, and career development (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). Classroom guidance is one delivery method of such supportive approaches, advantageous in part because it allows school counselors to reach all students in their schools (ASCA, 2012; Lopez & Mason, 2018). This curriculum is ideally “a planned, written instructional program that is comprehensive in scope, preventative in nature, and developmental in design” (ASCA, 2012, p. 85). In systematically delivering classroom guidance, school counselors use planned lessons crafted to ensure students acquire the desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes suited to their developmental levels (ASCA, 2012). These lessons comprise critical time school counselors spend in direct service to students. ASCA (2012) recommends school counselors spend 15%–45% of their time (depending on school level) delivering classroom guidance; thus, development of classroom guidance curriculum warrants careful consideration and intentionality (Lopez & Mason, 2018; Vernon, 2010).

Researchers have highlighted the value of classroom guidance for student outcomes (Bardhoshi, Duncan, & Erford, 2018; Villalba & Myers, 2008). For example, Villalba and Myers (2008) found that student wellness scores were significantly higher after a three-session classroom guidance unit on wellness. Similarly, Bardhoshi et al. (2018) found that teacher ratings of student self-efficacy were significantly higher after a 12-lesson classroom guidance unit on self-efficacy. In a causal-comparative study of 150 elementary schools, Sink and Stroh (2003) found that after accounting for socioeconomic differences, schools with comprehensive school counseling programs including classroom guidance had higher academic achievement than schools without such interventions.

The ASCA National Model (2012) reflects the importance of classroom guidance in a comprehensive school counseling program. For instance, designing a curriculum action plan is a key task in the management quadrant of the model. ASCA recommends school counselors develop a curriculum for classroom guidance that aligns with both student needs and prescribed standards. (Although ASCA

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[2012] refers to delivering a school counseling *core curriculum*, we use the term *classroom guidance* because of its familiarity among school counselors and counselor educators.) Once school counselors identify these student needs and prescribed standards, they meaningfully design corresponding lesson plans. ASCA (2012) asserts, “The importance of lesson planning cannot be overstated. . . . It is imperative to give enough time and thought about what will be delivered, to whom it will be delivered, how it will be delivered, and how student[s] . . . will be evaluated” (p. 55).

Despite these recommendations, school counselors appear hindered in designing highly effective lessons because of their limited training in curriculum design (Desmond, West, & Bubenzer, 2007; Lopez & Mason, 2018). This may occur in part because counselor educators do not consistently teach methods of developing a classroom guidance curriculum (Lopez & Mason, 2018). Standards of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015) reflect this lack of emphasis. Of the 33 CACREP school counseling specialty-area standards, only one standard (G.3.c.) relates to the topic of curriculum development. Indeed, after reviewing classroom guidance lesson plans on the ASCA SCENE website (ASCA, 2016), Lopez and Mason (2018) noted a need for better instruction on lesson design, concluding, “school counselors need further training in incorporating standards and developing learning objectives” (p. 9). We seek to address this need by introducing *Understanding by Design (UbD)* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011), a research-based approach to curriculum development used widely in K–12 classrooms across the United States, to strengthen the classroom guidance planning process. In doing so, we offer a framework for redesigning curriculum in response to three common questions from school counselors: How can I make student experiences in my classroom guidance lessons more meaningful, relevant, rigorous, and powerful? Because I see each class infrequently, how can I make my lessons more cohesive, rather than a series of disconnected activities? and How can I connect my lessons more directly to what I want my students to apply to their daily lives and accomplish after they leave my program?

Applying *UbD* to Classroom Guidance Curriculum Development

UbD presents a curriculum design framework for purposeful planning for teaching. The goal of this framework is teaching for understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011). Understanding goes beyond simply recalling facts or information. It involves a student coming to own an idea by deeply grasping how and why something works. Those who teach for understanding give students opportunities to make meaning of content through “big ideas” and transfer understanding of these ideas to new situations (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). *UbD* presents a structured system for (a) distinguishing between what is essential for students to know, understand, and be able to do, and what would be nice to learn if more time were available; and (b) considering the big ideas of the curriculum at the unit level rather than the individual lesson level (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011).

The *UbD* framework advocates the “backward design” of a unit through a three-stage sequence of clarifying desired results or goals of learning, determining needed evidence of learning, and planning learning experiences (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011). Beginning the unit design process with the end—or learning result—in mind helps prevent “activity-oriented design.” This problem occurs when planning does not begin with identifying clear and rigorous goals, but instead begins with creating activities that are “‘hands-on without being minds-on’—activities [that], though fun and interesting, do not lead anywhere intellectually” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 16). Activity-oriented design is a common problem in more traditional curriculum design approaches. Other problems in traditional approaches include: (a) a pattern of teaching in which the teacher directly transmits shallow factual content to students who passively receive information, making lessons more teacher-

centered than student-centered; or (b) failing to ask students to practice skills or create products that have real-world applications (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011).

UbD offers a way of thinking about curriculum design, not a recipe, a prescription, or a mere series of boxes on a template to be filled in (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). It presents guiding principles about planning for teaching that apply to teaching any topic from any field to any learner. Although these principles are commonly used by teachers, their application is not limited to general education lessons in core subjects. Because existing research has examined the effects of teaching for understanding in diverse content areas with diverse learners, its application to classroom guidance is a logical extension of an approach that is widely accepted as best practice in K–12 schools. Because classroom guidance targets big ideas of healthy student development and important skills with immediate real-world applications, its curriculum is a particularly strong fit for *UbD*.

Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of *UbD*

Although the *UbD* framework was developed over the last 20 years, the ideas of designing a curriculum that targets understanding and planning a curriculum backward from desired results are not new. Leading curriculum theorists have advocated these principles for the last century. Almost 90 years ago, for example, Dewey (1933) championed the importance of teaching for understanding, describing understanding as occurring when inert facts gain meaning for the learner through connection-making. Taba (1962) also maintained that specific facts and skills serve “as the means to the end of gaining an understanding of concepts and principles” (p. 177), and that the curriculum should therefore target student understanding of broader transferable ideas, rather than individual facts and discrete skills. Additionally, major theorists have promoted backward design as an effective planning process for many decades (Gagné, 1977; Mager, 1988; Spady, 1994; Tyler, 1948). *UbD* outlines a clear and structured process for designing curriculum that reflects these long-standing ideas. In addition to deep theoretical foundations, *UbD* also has strong empirical support. Specifically, its principles are supported by research from the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience and by research conducted in K–12 schools.

In the seminal summary, *How People Learn*, the National Research Council (2000) presented a comprehensive overview of psychology research on learning. This research indicates meaningful learning results from teaching that centers on broad concepts and principles that promote deep understanding of important ideas, rather than on narrow facts; emphasizes application of understanding, rather than drill or rote memorization; and prompts students to authentically perform complex skills to show they know when, how, and why to use skills in new contexts. Recent neuroscience research also indicates long-term memory storage and retrieval is more likely to be successful when students use knowledge in authentic contexts; engage in active, experiential learning; and discern relationships among conceptual ideas (Willingham, 2009; Willis, 2006).

Although no large-scale studies of the effects of curriculum developed using the *UbD* framework on K–12 student outcomes have been published to date, a second body of research has examined the effects of understanding-focused curriculum and instruction on student achievement more broadly (McTighe & Seif, 2003). For instance, Hattie’s (2009) seminal synthesis of meta-analyses of more than 50,000 studies of more than 80 million students suggested learning outcomes across content areas are positively influenced by curriculum that achieves an effective balance between surface versus deep understanding leading to conceptual clarity. Additionally, in large-scale studies of data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), a cross-national comparative study of the education systems of 42 countries and their outputs, American eighth graders’ proficiency was

found to be approximately average compared to other participating countries, while scores of 12th graders in advanced classes were at the bottom of the international distribution (Schmidt, Houang, & Cogan, 2004). When researchers sought to explain this relatively low performance of American students through analysis of TIMSS data, they painted a bleak picture of U.S. curriculum (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2004; Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1997), characterizing it as unfocused, lacking a coherent vision reflecting recognition of which ideas in a discipline are most important (Schmidt et al., 1997), and being “a mile wide and an inch deep” (Schmidt et al., 2004). A second series of studies on the influence of varied math curriculum on student outcomes indicated that teaching with a focus on understanding allowed students to both learn basic skills and develop more complex reasoning compared to more traditional curriculum (Senk & Thompson, 2003). The principles of *UbD* respond directly to the curricular problems outlined in these studies of K–12 learner outcomes.

Although research suggests students exposed to curriculum emphasizing understanding may experience improved outcomes compared to those who experience traditional curriculum, it also suggests that understanding-focused curriculum design is not widespread. For example, Weiss, Pasley, Smith, Banilower, and Heck (2003) conducted a large-scale observational study of K–12 classrooms selected to be representative of the nation. Researchers evaluated observed lesson quality using criteria that included lesson design. Almost 60% of lessons were categorized as low quality. When identifying common weaknesses of lesson design, Weiss et al. (2003) reported many lessons lacked structures to encourage understanding and intellectual rigor, while high-quality lessons were distinguished by “a commitment to . . . understanding through . . . application” (p. xi).

Research has not yet examined the effects of a classroom guidance curriculum designed in accordance with *UbD* principles. However, recent research (Lopez & Mason, 2018) has suggested that, as in the general education contexts studied by Weiss et al. (2003), high-quality curriculum reflecting these principles may not be common in classroom guidance either. Lopez and Mason (2018) conducted a content analysis of 139 classroom guidance lesson plans posted on the ASCA SCENE website (ASCA, 2016), using a 12-category rubric to identify each lesson plan as ineffective, developing, effective, or highly effective. Lopez and Mason’s criteria for a highly effective lesson plan included: introducing a “new concept or skill” (p. 6), not just rote information; developing clear and concise objectives for the lesson that reflected “at least one higher-order thinking skill” (p. 6); providing “an opportunity for active student participation” (p. 6) and “application of skill” (p. 8); and tightly aligning all phases of the lesson to the lesson objectives (p. 7). These criteria reflected an emphasis on teaching for understanding, not simple factual acquisition. Notably, the researchers classified no lesson plans as highly effective and only 28% as effective. Thus, the majority of the lesson plans were found to be developing or ineffective (Lopez & Mason, 2018). Although the lesson plans reviewed for this study were not representative of all classroom guidance curriculum, it is noteworthy that these plans were publicly posted by school counselors as model curriculum, suggesting they believed the plans were effective. Our paper responds directly to Lopez and Mason’s pressing call for school counselors to “strengthen” their “skill set” (p. 9) by borrowing methods of lesson design and curriculum development from K–12 general education practices and applying them to the special context of classroom guidance.

In the sections that follow, we briefly outline *UbD*’s three design stages as applied to the development of a classroom guidance unit. We then offer an example of a school counselor’s application of the *UbD* framework to the revision of his classroom guidance curriculum at the program, grade, unit, and lesson levels. In keeping with *UbD* principles, we advocate that school counselors should treat consecutive classroom guidance lessons as one unit when they address similar topics or themes, even if school counselors present the lessons several weeks apart. We

encourage school counselors to focus on designing cohesive units of a curriculum, rather than treating each lesson as an isolated learning experience.

“Backward Design” of a Curricular Unit

Stage 1. When applied to classroom guidance curriculum development, the first stage of backward design tasks school counselors with stating the learning goals, or desired results of a unit, with clarity and specificity. Although other curricular frameworks may refer to these statements of curricular aims as *learning objectives*, *UbD* uses the term *learning goals* to emphasize their purpose as a destination or end-point for student learning.

Stage 1 includes six components (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The first component prompts school counselors to identify pre-established goals for the program, such as national and state standards. The other five components are different types of learning goals to be written by the school counselor: transfer, understanding, essential question, knowledge, and skill goals. School counselors develop these goals through a combined process of “unpacking” standards into clearer or more specific learning outcomes, deciding which aspects of content are essential to emphasize in their context, and adding big ideas not suggested by the standards (see Table 1).

Table 1

Type of Learning Goal	Definition of Learning Goal	Stem That Begins Learning Goal
Transfer	Statements of what students should be able to accomplish independently in the long-term by using what they have learned (after completing the program/grade)	Students will be able to independently use their learning to...
Understanding	Statements of big ideas reflecting an important and connective generalization that helps students see themes or patterns across different content topics	Students will understand that...
Essential Question	Thought-provoking big idea questions that foster inquiry, meaning-making, and application	Students will keep considering...
Knowledge	Statements of specific facts that students should know and recall (such as vocabulary words and their definitions)	Students will know...
Skill	Statements of discrete skills that students should be able to do or use (starting with an active verb)	Students will be able to...

Note. Adapted from Wiggins and McTighe (2005, pp. 58–59) and Wiggins and McTighe (2011, p. 16). Examples of each type of learning goal from a classroom guidance curriculum are provided in Table 2 and Appendix A, and discussed in depth in the sections that follow.

Transfer, understanding, and essential question goals reflect long-term aims of education. Transfer goals describe desired long-term independent accomplishments, or what we want students to carry

forward and apply in their academic, career, or personal achievements *after* they finish their last learning experience with their school counselor. Understanding and essential question goals reflect the “big ideas” of which we want students to actively make meaning for themselves through examination and inquiry. In contrast, knowledge and skill goals reflect short-term acquisition goals; they serve as means to the ends of exploration and application of big ideas (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011).

In planning a classroom guidance curriculum, school counselors must think broadly about what students will learn in classroom guidance at the program level (everything learned throughout three years of middle school) and throughout a particular grade level (everything learned in sixth grade). They also must think more narrowly about what students will learn from classroom guidance in a particular unit (everything learned in a sequence of three sixth-grade lessons about similar topics) and in a specific lesson (everything learned on Tuesday). School counselors often write transfer goals, understanding goals, and essential question goals to apply to classroom guidance across their whole program or across a whole grade because these goals are broad and reflect long-term aims. When developing a single unit, school counselors might target one or two transfer goals out of all the transfer goals for the program or grade and one or two understandings and essential questions out of all the understandings and essential questions for the program or grade. In contrast, knowledge and skill goals are usually written to reflect new content that will be explicitly taught and assessed in just one unit (McTighe & Wiggins, 2015). Although the knowledge and skill may be used or practiced in future units, they would only be targeted as goals in one unit. After identifying a unit’s desired learning results in Stage 1, the school counselor then considers what specific evidence will be required to demonstrate whether those results have been achieved.

Stage 2. In Stage 2, the school counselor’s focus shifts to the particular products or performances that will provide evidence of proficiency with the learning goals identified in Stage 1. Tight alignment is needed between unit goals and unit assessments, meaning all key goals should be explicitly assessed through tasks or prompts thoughtfully crafted to reveal the student’s current proximity to each goal (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2011). Many school counselors may feel more comfortable assessing acquisition-focused goals like knowledge, because assessing through direct questioning for factual recall often seems familiar or straightforward. However, if a unit targets complex, authentic skills and big ideas, then the unit’s major assessments need to show the extent of learner understanding by asking students to (a) explain in their own words how they have drawn conclusions and inferences about understandings and essential questions and (b) apply their learning to new, real-world situations (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). After the school counselor has identified both the desired unit results and the evidence needed to demonstrate whether results have been achieved, the focus shifts to developing learning experiences for the unit.

Stage 3. The learning plan created in Stage 3 includes the key learning activities students will complete in each lesson and the ongoing assessment embedded in those activities to monitor progress and provide students with feedback. Before planning individual lessons in detail, in Stage 3 the school counselor considers the unit’s big picture while determining the most effective learning experiences. Because tight alignment between learning activities and unit goals is needed, school counselors must purposefully select learning activities to provide direct opportunities for students to gain proficiency with targeted learning goals.

In sum, the three stages of backward design provide a sequenced structure designed to prompt deep thinking about powerful long- and short-term learning outcomes; how to elicit the best evidence of how well learners have achieved those outcomes; and which learning experiences will best lead to the desired outcomes.

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors

Because ASCA's (2014) *Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student* offers school counselors clear statements of the long-term aims of school counseling programs, they are an effective starting point for designing a classroom guidance curriculum. ASCA explains that the standards prioritize what students should be able to demonstrate as a result of their experiences in a school counseling program. The standards should be used by school counselors to “assess student growth and development” and “guide the development of strategies and activities” (p. 1). The six mindset standards are “related to the psycho-social attitudes or beliefs students have about themselves in relation to academic work” (p. 1). The 29 behavior standards “include behaviors commonly associated with being a successful student. These behaviors are visible, outward signs that a student is engaged and putting forth effort to learn” (p. 2). *UbD*'s approach to developing a curriculum that targets the understanding and transfer of big ideas aligns with the thrust of ASCA's standards to deepen student understanding of key mindset ideas and transfer that understanding to new contexts through successful behaviors.

The following example demonstrates how one school counselor, Mr. Mendez, strengthened his classroom guidance curriculum by applying *UbD* principles. It describes the intentional work involved in making student experiences more meaningful, relevant, rigorous, powerful, and connected to the ASCA mindsets and behaviors. There is no single “right way” to develop a classroom guidance curriculum. We have worked with many school counselors and other educators in varied settings who have successfully applied *UbD* principles to their curriculum in different ways that match their own contexts. Mr. Mendez is a composite of these dedicated professionals, presented here as a single school counselor to offer the most illuminating example possible. We offer Mr. Mendez's story as a model of the thought processes a school counselor uses in applying *UbD* to classroom guidance curriculum design, recognizing that the specific mission or structure of school counseling programs may vary in diverse contexts.

Case Study of Classroom Guidance Curriculum Development

Mr. Mendez is the only school counselor at his middle school. When he described his interest in strengthening his classroom guidance curriculum to another teacher, his colleague shared an article on *UbD* with him. He decided to use its principles to revise his curriculum. Mr. Mendez sees each class in his school once per month (nine times per year) for a 60-minute block. Because he only delivers classroom guidance lessons to each class nine times, he designates three lessons for each of the three domains – social and emotional, academic, and career development (ASCA, 2012). He considers each set of three lessons in the same domain to be one unit. In the past, the three lessons in each unit were not cohesive, or not tied together with common ideas and related skills. Instead, he taught lessons on topics he thought would interest the students. These lessons were usually based on exercises he learned in his counselor education program, a few lesson plans his predecessor left behind, and activities he found on the internet.

Strengthening the Curriculum Across a Whole Program and Whole Grade Level

Mr. Mendez decided to begin the revision process by looking at ASCA's (2014) *Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student* and broadly considering how the mindsets and behaviors apply to his classroom guidance curriculum across all three grade levels. In the past, Mr. Mendez had always listed mindsets and behaviors from this document at the top of his lesson plans. However, he had added this information to the lesson plan *after* he wrote it based on what students were doing in that day's activity, rather than using the standards as starting points

and considering them to be destinations for student learning. As he read over the document, he first considered whether the standards sounded like any form of *UbD* learning goals (see Table 1). He noticed the mindsets reflected some “big ideas” of school counseling programs, while the behaviors sounded more like broad transfer goals.

Unpacking the mindsets. Mr. Mendez had copied and pasted the mindsets into lesson plans many times, but he decided to deconstruct or “unpack” them now in greater depth. He began by looking for the key concepts reflected in each mindset. Although he noted several concepts in every mindset, he decided to focus on the concept he felt was the most critical for middle schoolers in each one. He listed out: balance (M1), self-confidence (M2), belonging (M3), life-long learning (M4), fullest potential (M5), and attitude (M6; ASCA, 2014). Next, he noted how frequently the concept of success was reflected in these mindsets. As he thought about his school counseling program’s mission, he recognized that supporting students’ short- and long-term success, which has many different definitions, was his program’s overarching goal.

Concept mapping. After identifying these six key concepts of success, Mr. Mendez decided to draw a concept map to think more deeply about the connections among them (see Figure 1). He wrote the concept of success on one side of the map and then considered the relationships between that idea and the other key concepts he identified. After he drew arrows between them, he wrote phrases related to the language of the mindsets along each of the arrows to explain the connections between the ideas. Although Mr. Mendez had previously held a general idea of these connections, making the ideas explicit through this exercise forced him to think more clearly about how each of the mindsets led students directly toward success. Although he found this process to be a bit mentally taxing, he spurred this work on by asking himself, *If I can’t articulate these connections clearly for myself, how can I expect my instruction to reflect them clearly—or my students to really understand them?* This process of concept mapping led Mr. Mendez directly to writing understandings that applied to all grade levels of his classroom guidance program. He crafted an understanding for each of the six mindsets and then added a seventh understanding because he wanted one that focused specifically on the individualized meanings of success. After he had written the understandings, he wrote essential questions to go along with each one (see Table 2).

Big idea design principles. In writing understandings and essential questions for his whole program, Mr. Mendez kept three design principles in mind by asking himself a series of questions: *Who are my students? Which ideas are relevant to all of my diverse students at this developmental level in the context of my school? How can these ideas be worded in student-friendly language, so that students will understand and internalize these statements? Do the understandings and essential questions work together as matching pairs? and Do they include the same key concepts and reflect similar ideas?*

Mr. Mendez then shifted his focus from thinking about his classroom guidance program as a whole to thinking about what students learned at each grade level. He used the *ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: Program Planning Tool* (ASCA, 2003) to clarify which mindsets (with corresponding understandings and essential questions) he would target at which grade level. For example, he confirmed that the sixth-grade classroom guidance curriculum would focus on M3/U3/EQ3 in the social and emotional development unit, M2/U2/EQ2 in the academic development unit, and M4/U4/EQ4 in the careers unit (see Table 2).

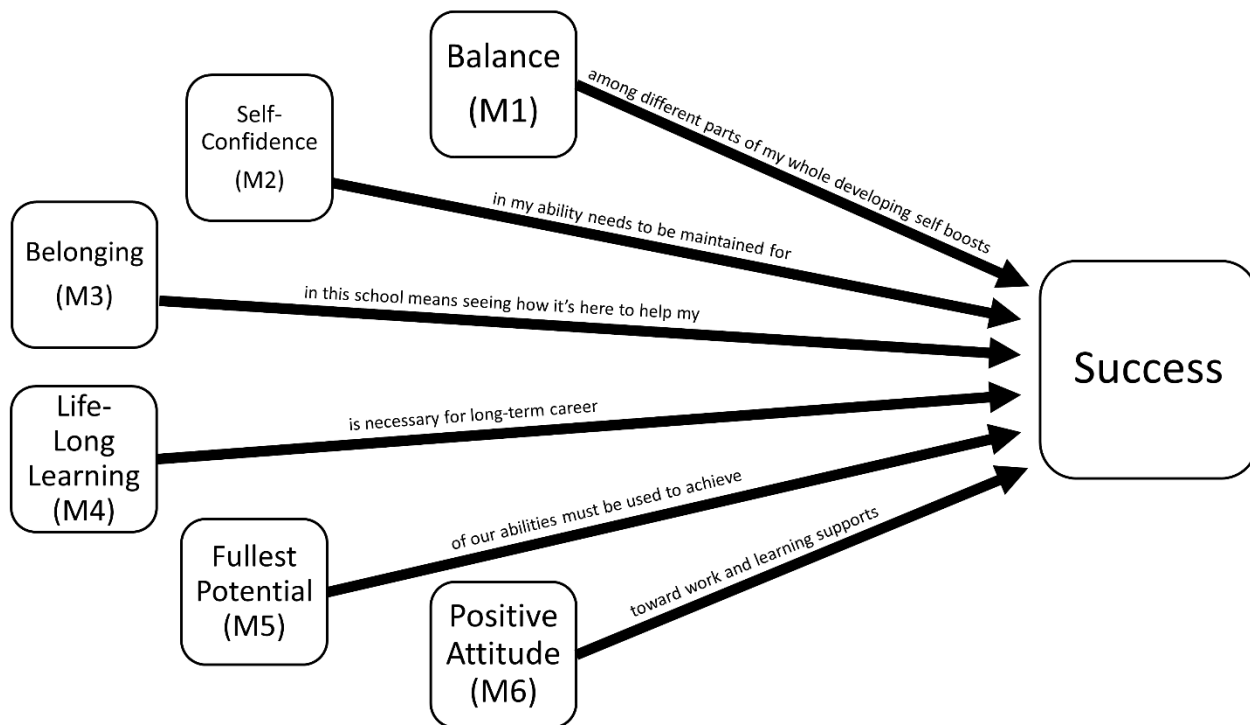


Figure 1.

Note. Adapted from template developed by McTighe and Wiggins (2004, pp. 112–113). Although the word “potential” did not appear in mindset 5 (ASCA, 2014), Mr. Mendez added this word to “fullest,” because it was a phrase he used often with students, and it seemed to be implied in M5.

Unpacking the behaviors. Mr. Mendez turned his attention next to the behaviors outlined in ASCA’s (2014) *Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student*. As he reviewed the learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills and compared them to the definitions of different types of *UbD* learning goals, he recognized these behaviors sounded like long-term transfer goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). He noted that for students to learn and ultimately enact them, the behaviors would need to be further broken down into specific, assessable skills to practice.

For example, as he considered “Demonstrate ability to overcome barriers to learning (B-SMS 6)” (ASCA, 2014, p. 2), he broke this transfer goal down into five skills. To accomplish this broader behavior, students must be able to: identify a specific barrier to learning; access resources with information on strategies for overcoming the barrier; develop a plan of action to overcome the barrier based on gathered information; use strategies from a plan of action to overcome the barrier; and evaluate progress on overcoming the barrier and adjust strategies as needed.

Mr. Mendez recognized that he often unpacked the behavior standards into more specific skills during conversations with students in individual and group counseling about how to achieve a behavior, but he had never thought through how students might practice these skills in classroom guidance. He decided he would unpack each of the behaviors into more specific skills later and would shift his focus from thinking broadly about the whole sixth-grade curriculum to redesigning individual units.

Table 2

ASCA Mindset Standards	Understandings	Essential Questions
M1: Belief in development of whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being	U1: <i>Success</i> demands that I grow every part of myself by making choices that balance my mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being.	EQ1: How do I make choices to balance different parts of my well-being at the same time?
M2: Self-confidence in ability to succeed	U2: I work to maintain my self-confidence in my ability to <i>succeed</i> .	EQ2: How do I keep my self-confidence up when I fail?
M3: Sense of belonging in the school environment	U3: I belong in this school, which is here to help me <i>succeed</i> .	EQ3: How do I help myself and my classmates feel like we belong here?
M4: Understanding that postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success	U4: I must be a life-long learner to <i>succeed</i> in a career.	EQ4: Why doesn't learning end when school ends?
M5: Belief in using abilities to their fullest to achieve high-quality results and outcomes	U5: <i>Success</i> requires me to use my abilities to their fullest potential .	EQ5: How can I stay motivated to use my abilities to their fullest potential , even when I don't feel like it?
M6: Positive attitude toward work and learning	U6: A positive attitude toward my work and my learning supports my <i>success</i> .	EQ6: How does my attitude affect my success in obvious and in hidden ways?
	U7: I am capable of deciding what my own <i>success</i> will look like—and of achieving that success.	EQ7: What does success mean to me—today? Throughout school? Throughout life?

Note. Mindset standards are quoted directly from *ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student*, by the American School Counselor Association, p. 1. Copyright 2014 by the American School Counselor Association. Mr. Mendez bolded the key concepts in each understanding and essential question to remind himself of the focus of every statement.

Next, Mr. Mendez returned to the *ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: Program Planning Tool* (ASCA, 2003) to clarify which behaviors, or transfer goals, he would target in different domains at which grade level. During this process, he kept in mind which mindsets (with corresponding understandings and essential questions) he had already decided to target at each grade level, and he selected behaviors for that grade level to go along with those mindsets. For example, because he had selected M3/U3/EQ3 (see Table 2) to target in his sixth-grade social/emotional unit, he selected related behaviors such as “B-SS 2: Create positive and supportive relationships with other students” and “B-SS 4: Demonstrate empathy” (ASCA, 2014, p. 2) to teach in sixth grade as well.

Strengthening the Curriculum at the Unit Level

At this stage, Mr. Mendez turned his attention to redesigning one unit. He picked his first unit in sixth grade—the social and emotional unit—for this work. He called the unit “Belonging in Middle School.” This was the first classroom guidance unit students would experience in middle school, and he wanted it to offer support for their transition from elementary school. Mr. Mendez felt that, in the past, the three lessons he had taught for this unit did not reflect a cohesive big idea, and he had picked activities because students might enjoy them, not because they were aligned to strong learning goals. He decided to use the three-stage backward design process to strengthen the unit by writing a one-page “unit plan.” He also decided to mentally put aside the activities he had used in this unit in the past as he did this redesign work. He thought this might help him avoid the problem of activity-oriented design and not be constrained by what he had done previously.

Stage 1. Mr. Mendez began by documenting the six components of Stage 1 in his unit plan (see Appendix A). He had already identified most of the learning goals when thinking through his whole sixth-grade curriculum. He knew this unit would focus on ASCA standards M3, B-SS 2, and B-SS 4. He considered the behavior standards to be transfer goals, and he had already written an understanding and essential question corresponding to M3. This meant he only needed to identify the specific knowledge and skill goals for this unit that would help students explore the big ideas developed from the mindset standard and achieve the transfer goals from the behavior standards.

Skills. To begin this process, Mr. Mendez decided to write his skill goals. He looked again at the transfer goal presented in B-SS 2: “Create positive and supportive relationships with other students” (ASCA, 2014, p. 2) and asked himself: *Which specific skills must students be able to do to accomplish this?* He decided the first skill underlying this transfer goal was classifying relationships with others as positive and supportive or negative and unsupportive (D1 in Appendix A). He reasoned that, before working on creating positive relationships, students needed to distinguish between such relationships and those that would not be supportive of success in middle school. Mr. Mendez then identified additional skills related to creating such relationships with peers: listening actively, interpreting others’ verbal and non-verbal cues about their feelings, and communicating one’s own feelings verbally and non-verbally (D2, D3, D4).

Next, Mr. Mendez considered the meaning of B-SS 4: “Demonstrate empathy” (ASCA, 2014, p. 2). He decided a key related skill was being able to analyze others’ perspectives to understand their feelings and actions (D5). Additionally, he noted that three skills he wrote with B-SS 2 in mind—D2, D3, and D4—also applied to this transfer goal about demonstrating empathy.

At the end of this process, Mr. Mendez had described five clear and specific skills students would need to practice in this unit to ultimately achieve the transfer goals, and these skills also connected to the unit’s understanding and essential question about belonging in middle school. He recognized that when he taught this unit in the past, students had not practiced these specific skills as ways to increase a sense of belonging in themselves and their peers through creating positive relationships. Similarly, he had not assessed these skills to determine whether his lessons were actually moving students closer to the goals of the ASCA standards.

Knowledge. Last, Mr. Mendez identified several pieces of factual knowledge students would need to know in the unit. To decide this, he asked himself: *What knowledge must students have to do the skills and to meaningfully explore the understanding and essential question?* For example, he recognized that students would not be able to classify a given relationship as supportive or unsupportive (D1) if they did not already know the characteristics of supportive and unsupportive relationships (K1, K2 in

Appendix A). Likewise, students could not meaningfully analyze others' perspectives (D5) if they did not know the meaning of the word *perspective* (K3).

One challenge Mr. Mendez faced in developing knowledge and skill goals was that he could think of a long list of facts or skills students might encounter or use at some point during the unit. Rather than capturing all of these as unit goals, he used two questions to keep his thinking focused: *Does this knowledge or skill reflect new learning that I will explicitly teach and assess in this unit* (McTighe & Wiggins, 2015)? and *Does this knowledge or skill reflect what is essential for students to learn to support my program's transfer goals and big ideas, not just what would be nice to learn if we had no time constraints* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)? If the answer to either question was no, he did not include that knowledge or skill as a unit goal.

Stage 2. To develop Stage 2, Mr. Mendez reflected on the most illuminating evidence he could collect from students to determine their proficiency with the unit goals after they completed the key learning experiences (see Appendix A). He decided the best way for students to demonstrate their proficiency with skills like active listening (D2), interpreting others' verbal and non-verbal cues about their feelings (D3), and communicating feelings to others verbally and non-verbally (D4) was to enact conversations through role plays in which they practiced the skills. He decided students would do this as the key learning activity in Lesson 3, and they would then complete a written reflection as his main unit assessment. Specific reflection questions would prompt students to reveal their understanding of the unit's big ideas, recall of the unit's knowledge, and proficiency with the unit's skills. Mr. Mendez would have students answer similar questions on a pre-assessment so he could evaluate student growth over time.

Stage 3. For the last stage of the unit plan (see Appendix A), Mr. Mendez thought broadly about how students could (a) gain proficiency with the unit goals in Stage 1 and (b) prepare to participate meaningfully in the role play and respond comprehensively to the written reflection prompts in Stage 2. He was particularly keen to ensure each of the Stage 1 unit goals would be taught and practiced in depth in at least one lesson's learning activities. To avoid the problem of activity-oriented design, Mr. Mendez asked himself, *What experiences do my students need to have in this unit to achieve my goals?* rather than *What activities would be fun?*

As he reviewed his unit goals again, he decided that the most effective learning plan would include a sequence of experiences involving student self-analysis, case study analysis, and role play. To ensure every unit goal would be targeted in at least one lesson, he identified in Stage 3 the goals to which each lesson aligned (see Appendix A). He also considered the methods of assessment he would use to gather data about student learning during or after each learning experience, such as collecting completed handouts, listening to student comments, and giving short exit cards.

Mr. Mendez found it useful to think about the learning experiences of all three lessons in this unit at the same time when he designed the unit plan. He knew he would develop these ideas further in individual lesson plans, but it was beneficial to consider at the unit level how key learning experiences across the three lessons all aligned to his learning goals and comprised a cohesive, purposeful learning sequence.

Strengthening the Curriculum at the Lesson Level

After he had completed the unit plan for Belonging in Middle School and understood how his lessons would work together to achieve the unit goals, Mr. Mendez revised his three individual

lesson plans. He liked using the ASCA (n.d.) *Lesson Plan Template* and decided that from now on, when he listed learning goals on lesson plans, he would simply copy and paste the goals from his unit plan that he was targeting in that lesson as the learning objectives. He would also copy goal labels (e.g., U1, EQ1, K2, D3) to remind himself which type of *UbD* goal each one reflected. As Mr. Mendez considered the learning activities he had previously used in this unit, he realized he would still be able to use many of those activities with minor revisions.

Lesson 1. In Lesson 1, Mr. Mendez could still have students complete an activity from past years in which they worked in small groups to generate lists of characteristics of positive and supportive versus negative and unsupportive relationships with peers. However, in the past, he had not connected that activity to any big ideas about the concept of belonging.

This year, Mr. Mendez would begin the lesson by posing the essential question to students as a critical question they would be answering for themselves during the first three months of school. As a warm-up, he would ask them to independently consider answers to the essential question, reflect on the challenges of building feelings of belonging in a new school, and identify a few strategies for helping themselves feel that they belong in middle school. Next, students would complete a brief activity to identify characteristics of supportive or unsupportive peer relationships in small groups. Mr. Mendez would then lead a short whole-class discussion in which he described typical sixth-grade peer relationships and asked students to classify them as supportive or unsupportive based on the characteristics their group listed. He also would discuss how building positive and supportive relationships with peers can be a key strategy for encouraging your own feelings of belonging. At the end of the lesson, students would work in small groups to develop a one-page handout for next year's incoming sixth graders with strategies for helping them feel like they belong in the middle school, including building supportive peer relationships.

Lesson 2. For Lesson 2, Mr. Mendez decided he would continue to use activities he had used in the past. He would begin the lesson by teaching students the definition of the term *empathy* and asking students to share with a partner an example of a time they felt empathy for a peer. He would then explain they were going to watch Life Vest Inside's (2011) "Kindness Boomerang" video in which a series of people are kind to others out of empathy. Next students would work in small groups to identify their three favorite examples of empathy in the video, the feelings of each *receiver* of empathy, and possible reasons the receiver felt that way.

Mr. Mendez would segue into the main activity by reminding students of the unit's essential question and explaining that demonstrating empathy is a key way to help classmates feel like they belong. He would explain that at the core of empathy is the ability to see others' perspectives to understand their feelings and actions, and that students would practice this skill through two case studies of fictional incoming sixth graders. After defining the term perspective, he would then show two brief videos to introduce the case studies: Daniel, a boy with a prosthetic arm (Siemens, 2012), and Amira, a Muslim girl who planned to join the girls' basketball team and wear a different uniform that accommodated her religious beliefs (Associated Press, 2015).

Students would then work in small groups to identify Daniel's and Amira's perspectives as students who might appear different from their peers, including how they might feel about coming to a new school and act in response to those feelings. Next, Mr. Mendez would lead a group discussion about how feelings of empathy might arise in ourselves from understanding Daniel's and Amira's perspectives, and how empathy is different from pity. Last, each small group would create a list of

verbal and non-verbal ways a supportive peer could communicate their empathy and a list of verbal and non-verbal ways an unsupportive peer might communicate a lack of empathy.

Lesson 3. Mr. Mendez did not plan to incorporate any activities he had used before into Lesson 3. This was because, after developing four specific skill goals based on B-SS 4: “Demonstrate empathy,” he realized he had not actually provided opportunities in the past for students to practice the skills that underlie demonstrating empathy. Now that he had these skill goals (D2, D3, D4, D5) clearly in mind, he wanted this unit to prompt students to use them authentically. Because students practiced D5 directly in Lesson 2, he focused on D2, D3, and D4 in Lesson 3—listening actively, interpreting others’ verbal and non-verbal cues about their feelings, and communicating one’s own feelings verbally and non-verbally. It seemed the best way to do this was through role play (see Appendix B for lesson plan).

Because Mr. Mendez only sees each class once a month, he planned to begin this lesson by showing the videos of Daniel and Amira again. However, this time, he would prompt the students to look for four “cues” about how their new classmates were feeling: (a) the words they used, (b) their tone of voice, (c) their body language, and (d) their facial expressions. He would pause the videos when Daniel describes “stuff I can’t do” and Amira says “I don’t want to look weird” so students could examine cues and jot down notes about what they see. Mr. Mendez would encourage students to hunt for more subtle cues and to focus on recording what they actually observed without judgment or criticism. He would then have students share what they observed in their same small groups from Lesson 2 and have each group share their common conclusions with the class.

Next, Mr. Mendez would ask each small group to review the lists they made in Lesson 2 of the ways a supportive peer would communicate empathy appropriately and the ways an unsupportive peer might communicate a lack of empathy. He would explain that they would be doing a role play with a partner in which one person would be Daniel (or Daniela) and the second would be himself or herself. Then, the partners would switch; the second person would be Amira (or Amir) and the first would be himself or herself. During the role play, the person playing Daniel or Amira would repeat what was said in the videos. The person playing themselves would listen actively, interpret verbal and non-verbal cues, and communicate empathy verbally and non-verbally.

After explaining these instructions, in preparation for the role play, Mr. Mendez would have students brainstorm ideas about what it means to listen actively. Then students would watch the videos of Daniel and Amira again—imagining these new classmates were present in the room—and practice active listening. Last, Mr. Mendez would lead a brief discussion about how, just as others give cues about their feelings through their words, tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions, we also communicate our own feelings like empathy in those four ways.

Students would then break into pairs and role play. After completing the role play, students would give each other feedback. In the round in which they played themselves, students would tell their partner how they interpreted the cues they saw in their partner’s word choice, tone of voice, body language, or facial expressions that let them know how their partner was feeling. In the round in which they played Daniel or Amira, students would tell their partner how they saw them actively listening and communicating empathy. Mr. Mendez would then lead a short whole-class discussion about how communicating empathy to Daniel and Amira could help these students feel they belonged at school. He would re-pose the essential question of the unit and ask students to reflect individually on how their answers to the question had changed from Lesson 1.

Overall, Mr. Mendez was pleased with his curriculum redesign process guided by *UbD*. He felt he now had strong clarity, not only about the purpose of individual lessons he taught, but also about the larger purpose of his classroom guidance program.

Conclusion

Although this article presented extensive detail about one school counselor's curriculum development process, we must repeat that Mr. Mendez's process—and *UbD* in general—should not be considered a recipe or prescription. A key strength of this model is that it provides a clear, step-by-step structure for curriculum design, while still offering flexibility in how it is applied. *UbD* should feel like a helpful set of guiding principles, not a straightjacket. We acknowledge that reading about Mr. Mendez's work may raise concerns for school counselors who feel they do not have adequate time to redesign their classroom guidance curriculum at the “big picture” level in light of the competing demands of their schedules, or who feel overwhelmed by the decision-making involved in this process if they are the only school counselor for their school or grade level. We offer three suggestions in response to these challenges.

First, we suggest setting manageable goals for curriculum design work if fully redesigning a classroom guidance program at one time is not feasible. For example, one elementary school counselor we know developed a 3-year plan for redesigning her curriculum using *UbD*. She spent one summer unpacking the ASCA mindsets and behaviors, identifying the big ideas for her program, and identifying which big ideas, mindsets, and behaviors would be addressed at each grade level. For the following three school years, she then worked on revising the classroom guidance curriculum for two grade levels each year. In doing so, she kept most of the lessons she already used in each grade, but added new elements to those lessons so that learning activities would better align with the larger goals of her program, such as revisiting essential questions during lesson introductions and conclusions.

Our second and third suggestions come from the work of Lopez and Mason (2018), whose recent study identified the elements of highly effective classroom guidance lessons and suggested such lessons may not be common. The authors recommended that school counselors attend their school's or district's professional development trainings for teachers on best practices in lesson design and curriculum development. They also noted that school counselors who have previous experience as teachers may be “ideal resources” (Lopez & Mason, 2018, p. 9) for school counselors without this experience; identifying such colleagues who can answer questions and provide guidance on curriculum redesign work may provide constructive support during this process.

We suggest that future research should qualitatively examine the experiences of school counselors who work to strengthen their classroom guidance curriculum. In addition, quasi-experimental research might compare outcomes for students who have experienced a classroom guidance curriculum designed with *UbD* versus more traditional approaches. Such research could inform those who offer professional development on these topics, as well as counselor educators who seek to prepare school counselors effectively for this component of their future work.

We conclude with several parting thoughts about how this article's contents might apply to different contexts. Mr. Mendez's redesign work should not be interpreted as a call for school counselors to scrap curriculum that is working and start over. Rather, we encourage school counselors to further strengthen what is already effective in their classroom guidance curriculum by applying *UbD* principles and redesigning components that are not aligned to clear, robust goals. School counselors should also recognize that they do not need to follow the curriculum development steps in the same order

as Mr. Mendez. If they prefer retaining an existing activity with the potential to build mindsets and behaviors, school counselors can unpack the big ideas underlying the activity or the knowledge and skills the activity teaches. However, school counselors should not be so tied to existing activities that they are unwilling to discard activities that are not aligned to powerful learning goals or will not lead to meaningful long-term transfer.

School counselors can use Mr. Mendez's process with any state standards in addition to the national ASCA standards explored here; they would use the same process of identifying the key concepts in state standards and writing specific statements about the big ideas that underlie them. The ASCA standards also can be unpacked into understandings and essential questions other than the ones Mr. Mendez wrote. They may vary depending on the concepts the school counselor focuses on, whether the big ideas must capture ideas presented in other standards or a school's mission statement, and who the students are, including their developmental levels.

Last, we emphasize that developing a classroom guidance curriculum is about the long-term outcomes school counselors want for their students. Mr. Mendez identified the concept of success as the unifying concept for his long-term goals. He therefore used that concept as a lens through which he made all curricular decisions, and he connected all of his transfer goals and big ideas to his program's broader goal of making his students successful in school and careers. But other school counselors might see their programs' long-term goals through different lenses. What matters is that a school counselor has clarity about those long-term outcomes and develops goals that match them. As counselor and teacher educators guiding our own students through this work, we often ask: If you don't know where you're going, how can you know if you've arrived? The key to high-quality classroom guidance is knowing the desired destination for students and making strategic curricular decisions to move students forward to that clear destination.

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Appendix A

Unit Plan for “Belonging in Middle School”

(Template adapted from McTighe & Wiggins, 2004, p. 13; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011 pp. 16–17)

Stage 1—Unit Learning Goals (Desired Results of Unit)	
PRE-ESTABLISHED GOALS (ASCA, 2014) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • M3: Sense of belonging in the school environment • B-SS 2: Create positive and supportive relationships with other students • B-SS 4: Demonstrate empathy 	
TRANSFER <i>In the long-term, students will be able to independently use their learning to...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create positive and supportive relationships with other students. (B-SS2) • demonstrate empathy. (B-SS4) 	
UNDERSTANDINGS (Us) <i>Students will understand that...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U3: I belong in this school, which is here to help me succeed. (M3) 	ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS (EQs) <i>Students will keep considering...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EQ3: how do I help myself and my classmates feel like we belong here?
KNOWLEDGE (Ks) <i>Students will know...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • K1: characteristics of positive/supportive relationships • K2: characteristics of negative/unsupportive relationships • K3: definitions of vocabulary terms: <i>perspective</i> and <i>empathy</i> 	SKILLS (Ds—what students must be able to Do) <i>Students will be able to...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D1: classify relationships with others as positive/supportive or negative/unsupportive based on their characteristics (B-SS 2) • D2: listen actively to show respect and gain information about others (B-SS 2, B-SS 4) • D3: interpret cues such as word choice, tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions to identify feelings of others (B-SS 2, B-SS 4) • D4: communicate feelings to others using word choice, tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions (B-SS 2, B-SS 4) • D5: analyze others’ perspectives to understand their feelings and actions (B-SS 4)
Stage 2—Unit Assessment Evidence	
Role play in Lesson 3 followed by written reflection with questions prompting students to explain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New strategies learned in unit for helping themselves feel like they belong (U1, EQ1) • New strategies learned in unit for helping others feel like they belong (U1, EQ1) • Examples of positive/supportive and negative/unsupportive peer relationships based on the relationships’ characteristics (K1, K2, D1) • Examples of how they listened actively, interpreted cues, communicated feelings, and analyzed another’s perspective in role play—and possible effects of those approaches on their partner’s sense of belonging (K3, D2, D3, D4, D5) 	
Stage 3—Unit Learning Plan	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesson 1: Self-analysis—past examples of: belonging and not belonging; positive and negative relationships; building feelings of belonging in new context through positive peer relationships (U1, EQ1, K1, K2, D1) • Lesson 2: Case studies—analyze two new classmates’ perspectives, reflect on strategies for building and expressing empathy for classmates (U1, EQ1, K3, D4, D5) • Lesson 3: Role play—take turns portraying fictional classmate from one case study and building positive relationship with classmate to support sense of belonging (U1, EQ1, D2, D3, D4) 	

Appendix B
Lesson Plan for Lesson 3 in “Belonging in Middle School” Unit
(Template from ASCA, 2018)

Lesson Plan Template

Activity: Belonging Role Play

Grade(s): 6

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors:

- M3: Sense of belonging in the school environment
- B-SS 2: Create positive and supportive relationships with other students

Learning Goal(s):

- U3: I belong in this school, which is here to help me succeed.
- EQ3: How do I help myself and my classmates feel like they belong here?
- D2: Listen actively to show respect and gain information
- D3: Interpret cues such as word choice, tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions to identify feelings of others
- D4: Communicate feelings to others using word choice, tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions

Materials:

- Small white board and marker for each small group
- Helping Hand video (Daniel) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X-EElhurg> (play 0:00–3:10)
- Muslim Girls Design Modest Sportswear video (Amira) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=63&v=pA7JQonL-TE (play 0:00–1:00)

Procedure:

- Show videos of Daniel and Amira. Students jot down notes on “cues” about how each is feeling: words, tone, body language, facial expressions. Students share what they found in same small groups from Lesson 2. Each group shares common conclusions with class.
- Each group reviews lists made in Lesson 2 of verbal and non-verbal ways in which supportive or unsupportive peers communicate empathy or lack of empathy.
- Explain instructions for Daniel and Amira role plays. (Student playing themselves must listen actively, interpret verbal and non-verbal cues, communicate empathy verbally and non-verbally.)
- To prepare for role play, each group brainstorms ideas on white board about what it means to listen actively, and students watch videos of Daniel and Amira again to practice active listening.
- Students break into pairs and role play a discussion as Daniel/a or Amir/a.
- Partners give each other feedback on three key skills they practiced.
- Lead whole-class discussion about how communicating empathy to Daniel and Amira as new students could help them feel they belong in the school.
- Re-pose essential question. Ask students to reflect individually on how their answers changed from beginning of Lesson 1.
- (Students complete written reflection as end-of-unit assessment.)

Plan for Evaluation: How will each of the following be collected?

- Process Data: Document the number of times this lesson is delivered to sixth-grade classes and how many students receive the lesson in each class.
- Perception Data: At the end of Lesson 3, distribute written reflection prompts assessing what students learned in the “Belonging in Middle School” unit:
 - Identify all the new strategies you learned in this unit for helping *yourself* feel like you belong at our school. (U1, EQ1)

- Identify all the new strategies you learned in this unit for helping *others* feel like they belong at our school. (U1, EQ1)
- In this unit, you learned that positive peer relationships can be supportive and negative peer relationships can be unsupportive for different reasons. (K1, K2, D1)
 - Give three examples of positive peer relationships that are supportive for *different* reasons. Explain why each one is supportive.
 - Give three examples of negative peer relationships that are unsupportive for *different* reasons. Explain why each one is unsupportive.
- Think about your work in today's role play when you played yourself (not Daniel or Amira). Give 4 specific examples of how you showed empathy by 1) actively listening, 2) interpreting your partner's "cues", 3) communicating your feelings, 4) analyzing your partner's perspective. Next to each example, explain how that part of showing empathy helped Daniel or Amira feel like they belong at our school. (K3, D2, D3, D4, D5)

(At the beginning of Lesson 1, ask students similar questions to gather pre-assessment data. Compare pre-assessment responses to responses on end-of-unit written reflection.)

- Outcome Data: Track student attendance, grades, and the number of behavioral referrals one month before this lesson, the month of the lesson, and in the three subsequent months to determine if the lesson's impact on students' sense of self-belonging is reflected in attendance, grades, and behavior.
- Follow-Up: Check in with teachers to see if they observe any changes in student behaviors surrounding creating positive and supportive relationships with other students (B-SS 2) and demonstrating empathy (B-SS 4). Examine all assessment data from end-of-unit written reflections and determine if any concepts remained unclear to students. Schedule any necessary follow-up "mini-lessons" if some students lacked clarity about any concepts.

Supporting Women Coping With Emotional Distress After Abortion



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Abortion is common, yet stigmatized. In some cases, abortion patients may experience feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, and other signs of emotional distress after their pregnancy is terminated. This article offers guidance for counselors seeking to provide nonjudgmental support to promote adaptation and recovery among abortion patients experiencing emotional distress. A brief summary of different ways to conceptualize emotional distress after abortion is provided. Next, a general cognitive behavioral framework is introduced, and common thought and behavioral patterns that may contribute to unresolved distress are explored. The article concludes with general recommendations to promote a respectful, collaborative alliance.

***Keywords:* abortion, abortion counseling, stigma, emotional distress, pregnancy**

Abortion is a common medical procedure. An estimated one in four women in the United States will have an abortion by age 45 (Jones & Jerman, 2017). Although prevalent, abortion is highly stigmatized and politicized. Many people understand abortion in terms of the competing rights of the fetus (to live) and the person who is pregnant (to retain autonomy over one's body and life). As such, legal abortion challenges conceptions of the nonviable embryo or fetus as having independent rights (Solinger, 2013). In the United States, abortion is more strictly regulated than any other medical procedure (Sanger, 2017), and these regulations contribute to a misperception that legal abortion is more medically dangerous than childbirth. Depending on state-specific regulations, abortion patients may be required to wait a certain amount of time after their initial clinic visit, to receive information about fetal development, or to observe fetal imagery before they are permitted to make final abortion care decisions (Sanger, 2017). Requirements like these imply that potential abortion patients are unlikely to make sound decisions without outside assistance (Norris et al., 2011), and also create different types of potential stressors depending on where a patient seeks abortion care.

Because abortion is so stigmatized, counselors and community members across many different settings (e.g., clinic volunteers, talk-line counselors) may encounter abortion patients experiencing distress after their procedures. This article offers guidance for both professional and paraprofessional counselors who are approached by a woman seeking support. The focus here is specifically on supporting a patient who has had a legal abortion procedure by a licensed health professional. Women seeking illegal abortions from unlicensed providers face additional physical and psychological risks that are beyond the scope of the current article.

Although different abortion patients will have different concerns, there are at least five general recommended aspects of after-abortion counseling (Needle & Walker, 2008). First, patients tend to disclose what happened, under what circumstances, and their broader social, medical, and family history. Second, a patient's decision-making process and knowledge about the abortion procedure before and after it occurred warrant full exploration. Third, counselors can support emotional stability by accepting and exploring a patient's feelings, including ambivalence as experienced both in the past and in the present. Fourth, spiritual and cultural issues can be addressed; these may include religious

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and familial values about abortion, parenting, and the concept of forgiveness. Finally, counselors can promote client self-care, potentially by identifying “safe” people to whom patients can disclose. When working within this broader framework, and while drawing upon best practices for pregnancy loss (e.g., Wenzel, 2017), a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) framework may help foster recovery. This article discusses (a) different ways to understand abortion-related distress, (b) concepts and methods from CBT that may help counselors support abortion patients, and (c) general recommendations for the respectful use of questions and language.

Understanding Emotional Distress After Abortion

Counselors may draw upon vastly different ways of understanding how and why abortion patients experience emotional distress after abortion. In the early 1990s, Vincent Rue proposed the existence of *post-abortion syndrome* (PAS), a variant of post-traumatic stress disorder. According to Speckhard and Rue (1993), “the trauma involved in being both attached to and responsible for the death of one’s fetal child can be emotionally overwhelming, and cause a range of symptoms” (p. 5). Symptoms of distress may manifest as guilt, self-directed blame and anger, sadness, intrusive thoughts about fetal death, and problematic family relationships, among others. Speckhard and Rue suggested that in some cases, distress may fluctuate with the menstrual cycle. In other cases, distress may remain dormant until patients experience subsequent reproductive events such as childbirth or menopause. Although some find PAS to be useful in conceptualizing cases, there have been longstanding debates about its validity (e.g., Dadlez & Andrews, 2010; Edwards, 2009). PAS has not been recognized as a formal medical or psychiatric diagnosis. Furthermore, PAS is often used in political contexts to argue against abortion rights and access (Dadlez & Andrews, 2010; Kelly, 2014). That is, “pro-life” activists use PAS to argue that potential abortion patients are likely to be emotionally harmed by abortion and therefore should be protected from making the decision to seek abortion.

In contrast, British “pro-choice” activist Ann Furedi (2016) argued that abortion-related distress may be more strongly related to the circumstances that led to pregnancy and the need for abortion than the actual abortion procedure itself. Although not all abortions occur after an unwanted pregnancy, Furedi wrote that “one of the few generalizations we can make about women seeking to end an unwanted pregnancy is that they are in a place they would rather not be. An abortion is no woman’s ambition, and an unwanted pregnancy is often (although not always) a marker of a lot of unwanted things in her life” (p. 52). Furedi also posited that the right to self-determination is key to psychological well-being, and for individuals who may become pregnant, self-determination involves the ability to plan when and how pregnancy is resolved. According to Furedi, access to family planning services, including abortion, is required for individuals to live as full citizens of society as well as to provide responsibly for their families. As such, restricting access to abortion is emotionally harmful because it denies those who are pregnant autonomy over both their bodies and their lives. This position is supported by research showing that patients who are denied an abortion show greater psychological distress than those who receive an abortion (Biggs, Upadhyay, McCulloch, & Foster, 2017). Importantly, both groups showed either stable or improved symptoms after a 5-year follow-up, indicating that initial distress did not generally lead to long-term or diagnosable conditions.

Abortion-related distress also can be conceptualized within a stress and coping framework (Major et al., 2009). Most abortions occur following an unintended pregnancy, and unintended pregnancy itself is a stressor that may increase risk for both short-term distress and longer-term mental health problems (Herd, Higgins, Sicinski, & Merkurieva, 2016). Individuals experience abortion as more or less stressful depending on a number of factors, including the timing of their abortion, their reasons for the decision, the type of procedure, their personal appraisals of abortion and other options, others’

social reactions, and the broader social and cultural context (Major et al., 2009). Overall, evidence from rigorous empirical studies indicates that legal first-trimester abortion does not increase risk for mental health problems. In addition, patients who have a later abortion for a wanted pregnancy due to fetal abnormality experience similar mental health outcomes compared to patients who miscarry, experience stillbirth, or experience newborn death (Horvath & Schreiber, 2017; Major et al., 2009).

Although research data do not suggest that legal abortion typically causes mental health problems (Horvath & Schreiber, 2017), many abortion patients experience symptoms of emotional distress, and in some cases, prolonged distress. Less commonly, some abortion patients experience mental health problems after their abortion procedures. In general, patients with a history of emotional disorders such as depression and those with low social support are at greater risk for mental health problems after a pregnancy resolves either by abortion or childbirth (Major et al., 2009; Russo, 2014). Abortion-specific risk factors for emotional distress include terminating a wanted pregnancy, feeling pressured into abortion by other people, perceiving the need for secrecy, and participating in or identifying with a cultural or religious group that teaches the idea that abortion is wrong (Major et al., 2009). These abortion-specific risk factors for distress warrant attention by counselors who are seeking to support abortion patients. Assessment of these factors may help inform how the counselor understands the sources of evident distress.

A Cognitive Behavioral Framework

Counselors who rely on a CBT framework help patients to become more aware of their thoughts, to differentiate between thoughts and facts, to objectively evaluate the evidence for their thoughts, and to consider making changes when warranted. For example, patients may change their thoughts after reflecting on the ways in which their thinking is incomplete or inaccurate. Alternatively, patients may change their behaviors or circumstances after reflecting on evidence that shows behaviors or circumstances to be problematic.

From a CBT perspective, emotional distress following abortion may be conceptualized as emotions that are linked to thoughts and behaviors related to the abortion experience. Identifying and talking about thoughts and behaviors that are related to strong negative emotional states can help patients who are feeling stuck and not able to move forward. Abortion patients in distress may benefit from becoming more aware of and talking through thoughts that elicit emotional distress and exploring these with a supportive listener. Cognitive behavioral therapists often use an ABC (activating event, belief, consequence) model in working with patients to collaboratively understand how patients are experiencing their lives. To illustrate, an activating event (A) might be scheduling a follow-up appointment after an abortion procedure. A thought or belief (B) might be, "I shouldn't have had sex if I wasn't ready to be a mother," and the consequences (C) of that belief may be emotional (guilt, low self-esteem), behavioral (keeping the abortion a secret), and interpersonal (feeling disconnected from loved ones after an abortion).

Behavioral avoidance is another common target of CBT interventions. It can be useful to ask about situations or events that a person has avoided since her abortion. To illustrate, attending a baby shower, interacting with young children, or going to the doctor might all be situations that a distressed abortion patient avoids. Such situations might elicit thoughts and beliefs about having had an abortion that, in turn, elicit aversive feelings. In some cases, avoidance might not be sustainable or healthy in the long-term. For instance, some abortion patients avoid sex because they worry about pregnancy and making another abortion decision. Such patients may benefit from discussing barriers to contraception use. They additionally may benefit from discussing the use of more effective methods of contraception.

Examining the evidence for ease of use and effectiveness could help prevent a future unintended pregnancy. In other cases, avoidance may be adaptive. In particular, it may be wise to avoid telling certain people about having had an abortion when the costs of disclosure are likely to outweigh the benefits. Genuine collaboration with the abortion patient is necessary to weigh the benefits of maintaining current thoughts and behaviors against the benefits of potential changes.

CBT counselors often differentiate between primary (basic) and secondary (manufactured) emotions (Resick, Monson, & Chard, 2017). Primary emotions occur as a direct result of an event. For example, an unintended pregnancy may lead to feelings of shock. The end of a pregnancy may lead to feelings of loss. Being insulted by protestors or denied access to medical care may lead to anger. Primary emotions tend to fade in intensity over time. Secondary emotions, in contrast, arise as an indirect result of an event, based on thoughts about the event. In particular, when an abortion patient thinks about having made the wrong decision, this thought could elicit guilt. When a patient thinks about how others may respond negatively to learning about her abortion, this thought could elicit worry. If different types of abortion-related thoughts are habitual or persistent, these associated emotions also will tend to persist, and the abortion patient may thus feel stuck in negative feelings. Thoughts that may not be fully accurate, constructive, or conducive to recovery, such as those described below, may be potential targets for intervention.

Some abortion patients find themselves stuck between multiple conflicting thoughts (and associated feelings). For example, an abortion patient might think, “It hurts to know I’ll never be forgiven by my Lord, but there’s no way that my family could manage another child,” or “I’m a feminist, so there’s no reason for me to feel sad.” In the former case, the patient switches the focus of her thinking between her religious tradition and her perceived family obligations. In the latter case, the patient switches between thoughts about her political views and her actual experience. Regardless of their content, experiencing conflicting thoughts can be confusing and disorienting, which may add to the overall experience of emotional distress. In addition, when thoughts are in conflict, one type of thought can be used to invalidate the other, preventing a full awareness and acceptance of each. Helping the patient acknowledge and accept the existence of conflicting thoughts may reduce confusion and distress. Furthermore, considering the evidence for each thought independently may allow the patient to consider which thoughts are worth holding onto and which might be less accurate, reasonable, or conducive to healing.

Common Thought Patterns Associated With Abortion-Related Distress

From a CBT approach, several specific patterns of thought may be associated with abortion-related distress. *Hindsight bias* is the tendency to use knowledge from the current situation to re-interpret past situations. Patients who exhibit hindsight bias believe they knew then what they know now, and they may assume that they have failed in some way by making the decision that they did. One approach to hindsight bias is to ask for more detail about the patient’s life context and specifics of the decision-making process at the time of the pregnancy. Counselors might ask questions such as: “How did you find out you were pregnant? What were your initial reactions? Who did you tell, and why? How did they respond?” Counselors might specifically ask what the patient perceived *at the time* as the reasons to consider abortion versus the reasons not to. “If you can try to remember during that time of your life, I’m curious, what seemed like good reasons for the decision? What seemed like good reasons *not* to make this decision?” In making the decision to end a pregnancy, abortion patients tend to consider the impact of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting on their current and future lives, health, obligations, and goals (Finer, Frohwirth, Dauphinee, Singh, & Moore, 2005). Given that many abortion patients have already given birth, many also consider the impact of pregnancy,

childbirth, and parenting on children already in the home (Jones, Frohwirth, & Moore, 2008). When this reflection is accurate, counselors could comment that the abortion patient seemed to put a lot of thought into the decision, or they might reflect hearing that the patient had considered multiple important factors. A counselor might observe that it sounds like the patient made the best decision based on the available information at hand, although some important information may not have been accessible at the time. Some patients who are not parenting children might appreciate hearing that this type of thoughtfulness seems like a quality that would allow them to be a loving and effective parent in the future, when they are ready.

Another type of thought that may be related to abortion-related distress is *belief in a just world*. Many people hold the simple belief that good things happen to good people, and thus bad things happen to bad people. For some abortion patients, an unintended pregnancy is *bad*, an unhealthy pregnancy or fetal anomaly is *bad*, or an abortion is *bad*; thus, the self is *bad*. When an abortion patient terminates a pregnancy because of outside pressures, such as when parents, a partner, or a workplace would not accept a pregnancy, childbirth, or parenting, this lack of acceptance can also lead to self-blaming thoughts. A patient may perceive herself as having made bad decisions about relationships or workplaces that do not offer her support. An important corollary of belief in a just world is that a person who is bad does not deserve to feel better or to receive support. Some abortion patients feel that they deserve to be punished, and they deprive themselves of intimacy with others. Others may believe they do not deserve to participate in self-care activities or to “indulge” in interventions such as relaxation training, mindfulness meditation, or distress tolerance.

To address belief in a just world, it can be helpful to explore how the patient developed this belief as well as to explore both supportive and disconfirming evidence. Upon reflection, many patients are likely to acknowledge that belief in a just world is a common theme in fairy tales and other lessons imparted to very young children. Likewise, patients are likely to acknowledge that accidents sometimes happen, people can make mistakes and still be good and moral, and that sometimes bad things happen to good people. Inquiring about other people who they perceive as deserving and not deserving of distress and hardship may be helpful. For example, counselors might ask patients to identify others who have “gotten away with” crimes without punishment or censure and to identify good, deserving people who have faced unfair experiences or mistreatment. In addition to these explorations, a counselor might empathize with the wish that people would get what they deserve, even if the world does not always work that way.

Outcome-based reasoning, a tendency to assume that emotional distress is the natural result of a bad decision, is closely related to belief in a just world. As applied to an abortion patient in distress, the end result (distress) may be thought of as reflecting the quality of the decision to terminate the pregnancy (bad). Outcome-based reasoning reflects an interest in a world that is predictable and orderly. As with belief in a just world, asking questions about the evidence for outcome-based reasoning may be helpful. Counselors could wonder aloud about times that the patient has seen good intentions lead to problematic outcomes, good behavior lead to punishment, or bad behavior lead to reward. In addition, patients using outcome-based reasoning often assume that they would feel better if they had made a different prior decision. As such, the counselor might explore with the abortion patient the possible consequences of decisions other than abortion. Useful questions might include: “What were the other options that you considered? If you instead decided to become a single parent, or to make an adoption plan, what would that look like now? What would be the consequences of these different decisions, emotionally and otherwise?” Thinking through the available options and considering all the different consequences of each may allow patients to consider the possibility that

alternative prior decisions also might have been distressing, and perhaps even more so. Patients might conclude that each possible option was likely to lead to different types of stress and challenges, some in the short term, and some in the long term.

The final type of thought pattern addressed here involves *all or none thinking*. Some abortion patients hold themselves singularly responsible for becoming pregnant, for experiencing a complicated or unhealthy pregnancy, for making an abortion decision based on reasons that now seem suspect (such as trying to please their parents or a partner, or not having enough money), or for causing the circumstances that led them to decide that abortion was the best option. One approach to this type of thought pattern is to explore what seems to be a reasonable amount of responsibility rather than hyper-responsibility. Some apparently hyper-responsible patients might appreciate hearing a reflection along the lines of, "It sounds like you played a role in the unintended pregnancy, which makes you feel badly, and it sounds like other people and circumstances also played a role."

In other cases, abortion patients assign complete responsibility for the abortion decision to other people who urged them to end their pregnancies. Careful exploration of this thought pattern is needed. Some financially or emotionally dependent abortion patients, particularly younger ones, may have faced strong pressure from parents or a partner to seek an abortion. In addition, pressuring someone into an abortion may be part of a larger pattern of coercive control or intimate violence. If an abortion patient describes being compelled by another person to abort a pregnancy, it may be helpful to screen for intimate violence specifically as well as to ask about other ways in which they feel constrained within their close relationships.

In the absence of coercive control or violence, some patients still may blame their abortion decisions on the wishes of other people. Other abortion patients may regret taking the advice of others and may hold extreme negative thoughts about themselves as well as others who influenced their decisions. In both types of cases, counselors might ask questions to help explore boundaries and assertiveness within an abortion patient's intimate relationships. It could be useful to ask when and under what conditions the patient believes it is useful to take others' feelings into account when making important decisions. It may be appropriate to reflect that it can be challenging to balance different sources of influence. Abortion patients who feel like they should have stood up for themselves or for their unborn child might benefit from considering what barriers to assertiveness they experienced and what degree of influence they want others to have over their lives. Patients might also develop a plan for acting differently in the future when they are making a personal decision that affects others in their social networks. Collaborative work with a counselor may help to promote assertiveness while also conveying to the patient that she is deserving of respect.

Conveying Respect for Abortion Patients

This article has focused on ways of understanding abortion-related distress, thoughts that may be associated with abortion-related distress, and topics of conversations that might help promote recovery. Suggestions have been offered about what to listen for, possible questions to ask, and thoughts and feelings that might be reflected. This final section offers suggestions about methods of asking questions and general use of language in order to promote rapport and the patient's sense of feeling respected, understood, and validated. Most broadly, rapport between the counselor and the abortion patient is essential, and the goal should be for the abortion patient to feel both the presence of unconditional positive regard and the absence of negative judgment on the part of the counselor (e.g., Kimport, Foster, & Weitz, 2011).

Socratic dialogue. Socratic dialogue involves asking questions that help others come to new understandings about their thoughts, behaviors, and experiences (Padesky, 1993). Questions may allow the patient to consider new or different information that has not been considered. When an abortion patient describes patterns of thoughts that sound distressing, a counselor might ask for more information in a way that gently challenges those thoughts. At the same time, answers to the questions may reveal that the counselor had an incomplete understanding of important aspects of the situation. Because no counselor can know the unknown, questions should be asked in the spirit of mutual inquiry, with constructive curiosity, and with compassion. Questions should not be asked to interrogate or to imply that the counselor knows the correct way to think and feel. Likewise, questions should not be asked to try to elicit a specific right answer. Rather, questions are asked in a genuinely open way with the goal of eliciting more information about the events that occurred and how those events may be perceived at present. In the process of reflecting on answers to open questions, the abortion patient has the opportunity to explore whether there are alternative ways to think about an experience that are accurate, balanced, and reasonable, and that lend themselves to self-compassion and healing.

Language related to gender, social roles, and pregnancy. In general, to be accurate and validating, counselors are advised to use the terms that patients themselves use to describe themselves, others, and their experiences. This means listening carefully and asking open questions to learn about a person's situation and about how the patient identifies. It is advisable to listen for how the abortion patient describes their gender identity, and if they are in a partnered relationship, how the patient describes their partner's gender, because not all people who seek abortion identify as women and not all are involved in heterosexual relationships.

It is useful to listen for words that refer to the different social roles that a patient or others may occupy, including mother, father, baby, child, or fetus. Some couples immediately identify themselves as mothers or fathers when one person is pregnant. Others only identify themselves in these ways after a certain point in the pregnancy or after birth. When individuals are already parenting children, they are likely to identify themselves as mothers or parents independent of the pregnancy that ended in abortion. Reflecting the patient's own words shows respect and validation. For example, consider an abortion patient who asks, "What kind of a person fails to protect her child and instead selfishly decides to end her child's life?" In response, it is advisable for the counselor to use the word "child" (not "fetus") and to ask for more information about the decision-making process to better understand the circumstances. Additionally, it might be helpful to reflect feelings of guilt or shame and to ask about the thoughts the patient is having that connect to those feelings.

Counselors should be aware that the language that they use may reflect assumptions about whether the pregnancy was wanted or contraception was used. Although most (but not all) pregnancies that end in abortion are unintended, some unintended pregnancies are happy accidents. Additionally, some intended pregnancies become unwanted after life circumstances change, such as when a relationship ends or health problems emerge. Regarding contraception, some people who are sexually active do not use contraception or do not use it correctly, but sometimes contraception fails, and in cases of reproductive or sexual coercion, a patient may be blocked from effective contraceptive use (Chamberlain & Levenson, 2012). As such, until hearing how the patient describes the situation and how conception occurred, it is recommended to avoid referring either to the "father" of the pregnancy or to the "partner." In some cases, abortion patients who seem to feel singularly responsible for becoming pregnant make no mention of anyone else. Questions that might help identify others involved in conception could include, "Who else knows about the pregnancy?" or "Tell me about the

episode that led to you becoming pregnant.” If a patient says that the pregnancy happened because her boyfriend’s condom broke, it is validating for the counselor to refer to her “boyfriend,” but if the patient discloses that she was raped, the counselor can refer to the “perpetrator” or the “rapist.”

Language related to politics and medicine. Counselors are advised to avoid language that may have direct or implied connections to politics, including either “pro-choice” or “pro-life” activism. In discussing the abortion decision-making process, the term “choice” can imply connotations of being “pro-choice.” Instead, the terms “decision” and “option” can be substituted with ease. For example, “Can you tell me about how you decided to terminate your pregnancy?” or “It sounds like you picked the option that made the most sense to you at the time.” Similarly, although it is often important to explore different types of thoughts and feelings that occurred at different times, such as before and after an abortion procedure, it is best to avoid the term “post-abortion.” Because of connections between “pro-life” activism and PAS, the phrase “after abortion” can be substituted as a politically neutral and factually accurate alternative. Finally, to work effectively with abortion patients who have safely and legally terminated pregnancies, it is recommended that counselors develop a basic understanding of abortion and its terminology (Grimes & Stuart, 2010), including the difference between surgical abortion (removing the contents of the uterus with instruments, without incision) and medical abortion (ingesting pills to expel the products of conception from the uterus).

Conclusion

Abortion patients who are in distress can be coping with stigma as well as a variety of realistic stressors and concerns. At the same time, abortion patients might be experiencing patterns of thought or behavioral avoidance that are contributing to intense or prolonged emotional distress. By applying concepts and methods from CBT, both professional and paraprofessional counselors across a variety of community settings may participate in constructive conversations with patients that foster adaptation and recovery. Counselors may collaborate with patients to help them become more aware of their thoughts and how these thoughts are related to feelings and behaviors. Conversations with supportive, nonjudgmental individuals who serve in a counseling role may allow abortion patients to reflect honestly and realistically on their past experiences and current lives. Such reflections may give way to self-compassion and may help to transform distress into feelings of acceptance and peace.

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Examining Student Classroom Engagement in Flipped and Non-Flipped Counselor Education Courses



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Flipped learning is an innovative teaching approach in which students view pre-recorded video lectures outside of class, then engage in activities applying course concepts during class. By removing lecture from face-to-face class time, instructors free up time in class for students to explore and apply course content. Flipped learning is a particularly useful approach in counselor education, given the need for both content and practice in the discipline. In this study, we examined student classroom engagement in flipped and non-flipped counseling courses. Using a causal comparative method, we compared student engagement via the Classroom Engagement Inventory in four counseling theories course sections. Students in the flipped counseling courses ($n = 30$) reported statistically higher classroom engagement than students in the non-flipped courses ($n = 37$). These results lend additional support to the promotion of flipped learning in counselor education.

Keywords: flipped learning, classroom engagement, counselor education, flipped counseling courses, student engagement

Counselor educators are tasked with balancing students' need to learn course content and their need to apply that content (Gladding & Ivers, 2012; Sommers-Flanagan & Heck, 2012). In recent decades, a new teaching approach has emerged that supports counselor educators in navigating that balance—*flipped learning*. In flipped learning, students individually view pre-recorded video lectures outside of class so that time spent in class is freed up solely for application-based learning activities (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Gerstein, 2012; Wallace, Walker, Braseby, & Sweet, 2014). This approach appears especially valuable in counselor education because it allows counseling students to learn critical content relevant to the counseling profession (e.g., counseling theories, techniques), while providing them sufficient in-class time to apply, discuss, or practice content in classroom activities (Merlin, 2016).

Moreover, flipped learning appears worth consideration given its use of both online and face-to-face learning components. Researchers in a variety of disciplines (e.g., communications, political science, social work) have examined student perceptions of online versus face-to-face (F2F) course formats (Bolsen, Evans, & Fleming, 2016; Bristow, Shepherd, Humphreys, & Ziebell, 2011; Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014; Platt, Yu, & Raile, 2014; Young & Duncan, 2014). Findings from most of the studies suggest that students have positive perceptions of online learning, though a few (Bristow et al., 2011; Young & Duncan, 2014) suggest that more traditional F2F formats are preferred for some subject areas (e.g., communications) and by some types of students (e.g., working vs. non-working). Other studies suggest that blended formats, which contain a mixture of F2F teaching methods and online instruction tools, could be a balanced compromise (Brown, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Paechter, Kreisler, Luttenberger, Macher, & Wimmer, 2013; Thai, De Wever, & Valcke, 2017). Flipped learning represents one such blended learning approach because it combines teaching and learning

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efforts in both online spaces (via posted video lectures) and physical classroom spaces (via in-person activities; Brown, 2016).

The prevalence of flipped learning in higher education has increased since 2000, and the teaching approach has recently gained momentum in counselor education in addition to or instead of more traditional, lecture-focused approaches in non-flipped courses (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Merlin, 2016; Merlin-Knoblich & Camp, 2018; Moran & Milsom, 2015). Despite this attention, no researchers have published a comparison of flipped and non-flipped courses in counselor education. In this article, we seek to fill this gap by describing the findings of a causal comparative study comparing one aspect of student experiences in flipped and non-flipped counseling courses—classroom engagement.

Classroom Engagement

Classroom engagement refers to “a student’s active involvement in classroom learning activities” (Wang, Bergin, & Bergin, 2014, p. 1). Researchers have determined that the construct is comprised of three components: affective engagement, behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Since the 1990s, researchers have given substantial attention to student engagement in higher education classrooms (Trowler, 2010). This focus is due in large part to the strong relationships between engagement and positive student outcomes, such as student achievement and graduation rates (Elmaadaway, 2018; Harper & Quaye, 2009; O’Brien & Iannone, 2018; Trowler, 2010). Researchers have acknowledged that student classroom engagement is a multifaceted construct impacted by multiple variables, including instructors’ behaviors with students in the classroom (Krause & Coates, 2008; O’Brien & Iannone, 2018). Thus, we chose to study the potential relationship between instructors’ use of flipped learning and student classroom engagement. In this study, we sought to understand if students reported different perceptions of their classroom engagement levels in flipped and non-flipped counseling courses. Next, we present an overview of the flipped teaching approach and its research base.

Flipped Learning Underpinnings

Flipped learning is a teaching approach in which students view pre-recorded video lectures online outside of class, then meet in class for F2F learning activities in which they apply and explore course content. These activities can include group projects, discussions, skill practice, and experiential activities (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Gerstein, 2012). Flipped classrooms are different from non-flipped classrooms in that non-flipped classrooms feature in-class lecture for all or part of each F2F class. Thus, students in non-flipped classrooms spend class time listening to an instructor lecture instead of viewing recorded material on course content outside of class and participating in activities in class (McGivney-Burelle & Xue, 2013; Murphy, Chang, & Suaray, 2016). In some non-flipped classrooms, instructors use lecture as the primary instructional approach, whereas in other non-flipped classrooms, instructors pair lecture with experiential activities in class (Cavanagh, 2011; Foldnes, 2016). Given the popularity of experiential learning in counselor education (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and for the purpose of this study, we define a non-flipped counseling classroom as one in which students engage in both in-class lecture and experiential activities when meeting F2F.

Flipped Learning Process

When designing a flipped classroom, instructors complete two primary tasks. First, they create or select a pre-recorded video lecture with the essential content students need to learn. Instructors can

create such videos using screen capture software like Camtasia (www.camtasia.com) and Screencast-O-Matic (www.screencastomatic.com). These programs allow users to create videos with audio and video of an instructor explaining a presentation with slides (e.g., a PowerPoint presentation). Because experts recommend that video lectures are no more than 15–20 minutes in length, instructors must carefully select the most essential content that students would benefit from seeing and hearing explained.

After creating video lectures, instructors design a series of in-class F2F activities for their flipped classroom. In these activities, students apply, discuss, and practice the content they learned in the pre-recorded video lecture. Flipped F2F classroom activities can vary by discipline and instructor, but they often include collaborative group activities, shared projects, and practice sessions. Scholars note that although the video lectures associated with flipped learning often receive the most attention, it is actually the in-class activities that are most crucial to the student learning process (Bergmann & Sams, 2014; Merlin, 2016).

Flipped Learning in Higher Education

As flipped learning has grown in popularity, so too has its research base. Researchers have studied a range of constructs related to the approach, including student and instructor perspectives (Gilboy, Heinerichs, & Pazzaglia, 2015; Hao, 2016; Long, Cummins, & Waugh, 2017; Nouri, 2016; Wanner & Palmer, 2015) and student outcomes (Baepler, Walker, & Driessen, 2014; Davies, Dean, & Ball, 2013; Foldnes, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2016). Researchers also have studied flipped learning in a variety of disciplines, including chemistry (Baepler et al., 2014), engineering (Kim, Kim, Khera, & Getman, 2014), public health (Simpson & Richards, 2015), pharmacy (McLaughlin et al., 2013), and information systems (Davies et al., 2013). As described below, they have consistently found positive outcomes related to flipped learning, with occasional incongruences.

Research on student perceptions of flipped learning has indicated that this teaching approach is generally enjoyed (Gilboy et al., 2015; Hao, 2016; Nouri, 2016). For example, in a sample of 142 nutrition students, 62% of participants reported preferring flipped learning to a traditional lecture format (Gilboy et al., 2015). In a sample of 240 research methods students, 75% of participants reported having positive attitudes toward flipped learning after completing flipped courses (Nouri, 2016). Moreover, in literature reviews of flipped learning research, authors concluded that student perceptions of flipped learning are mostly positive (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Zainuddin & Halili, 2016).

In general, researchers have found higher student achievement in flipped classrooms compared to non-flipped classrooms (Baepler et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2013; Foldnes, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2016). For example, Foldnes (2016) found that the exam scores of statistics students in a flipped learning course were 12% higher compared to those in a non-flipped course. Murphy and colleagues (2016) also compared test scores in flipped and non-flipped undergraduate algebra classes and found that flipped classroom final exam scores increased 13% compared to non-flipped classroom scores.

Increased achievement in flipped classrooms may be due to increased student engagement (McLaughlin et al., 2013). Researchers have found a perceived increase in engagement in flipped classrooms from both student and instructor perspectives (Faculty Focus, 2015; Lucke, Dunn, & Christie, 2017; Simpson & Richards, 2015; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). For instance, in their study of engineering students who participated in a course before and after it was flipped, Lucke and colleagues (2017) found that students reported an increase in engagement. Instructors also noted “a substantial increase in the level of observed student engagement” after the course was flipped (p. 54). Similarly, Simpson and

Richards (2015) surveyed students who completed a flipped undergraduate health course and found that students reported that the flipped format enhanced their course engagement.

Flipped learning is a valuable instructional approach in counselor education, given its student-focused nature. Despite this relevance, research on flipped learning in counselor education is limited (Merlin, 2016). To date, researchers have published only three studies on flipped learning in counselor education. Moran and Milsom (2015) described flipped learning with 15 graduate students in a school counseling foundations course. They assessed student perceptions of the flipped course using Likert scale ratings, and students reported that in-class activities facilitated their learning more than pre-class activities. Fulton and Gonzalez (2015) studied two flipped career development courses by distributing pre- and posttests to students. They found overall increases in attitudes about career counseling. Lastly, Merlin-Knoblich and Camp (2018) conducted a qualitative case study to explore counseling student experiences in a flipped life span development course. Their participants reported that the flipped course was enjoyable, beneficial, and engaged them in learning inside and outside of the classroom.

Purpose and Rationale for the Study

Previous studies about flipped learning in counselor education are useful in drawing attention to use of the teaching approach in the field (Fulton & Gonzalez, 2015; Merlin-Knoblich & Camp, 2018; Moran & Milsom, 2015). However, across these studies, researchers did not employ a comparison group to examine if flipped learning courses produce different outcomes than non-flipped courses. Given this critical variable in understanding the value of flipped learning, research is needed on the impact the approach has on counseling students compared to non-flipped teaching approaches. To fill this research gap, we chose to compare flipped and non-flipped counseling courses by examining student classroom engagement.

Classroom engagement is the amount of active involvement a student has in learning activities while completing a course (Wang et al., 2014). We chose to study classroom engagement for three reasons. First, due to our interest in comparing flipped and non-flipped counseling courses, it was imperative to measure a construct specific to the individual class setting. Student classroom engagement refers to student involvement at the classroom level, which is more specific than overall school engagement (Wang et al., 2014). Second, given the lack of research on outcomes related to flipped learning in counselor education, we sought to understand if the teaching approach appears to impact classroom engagement, which may contribute to greater student enjoyment and better comprehension of counseling concepts. Lastly, although researchers have studied classroom engagement in previous studies on flipped learning, the topic has not been widely reviewed, and a need exists for a greater understanding of how flipped learning impacts student classroom engagement (Faculty Focus, 2015; Lucke et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2013; Simpson & Richards, 2015; Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

Our research question was: Do significant differences exist between student classroom engagement levels in flipped counseling course sections and non-flipped counseling course sections? We hypothesized that the classroom engagement levels of students in the flipped counseling course sections would be significantly higher statistically than those of students in the non-flipped counseling course sections.

Method

We used a causal comparative design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to study student engagement in flipped and non-flipped counseling courses at a medium-sized public university in the mid-Atlantic region. In a causal comparative study, researchers compare groups by a cause, or independent variable, that has already occurred (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the cause was a flipped or non-flipped teaching approach in counseling theories courses.

Procedures

The university where we conducted this study has a small master's counseling program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and holds one class section for every course taught each semester. In order to compare a similar counseling course taught in both a flipped and non-flipped approach, we compared a flipped Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents course ("experimental group") to a non-flipped Counseling Theories course ("control group") at the same university. Both courses include parallel emphases on counseling theories, as shown in Table 1. To obtain a sample large enough for inferential statistical analysis, we collected data in two subsequent years from students in two flipped Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents courses and two non-flipped Counseling Theories courses. All courses met weekly across a 15-week fall semester.

Table 1

Course Topics in Flipped and Non-Flipped Courses Studied

<i>Flipped Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents</i>	<i>Non-flipped Counseling Theories</i>
Psychoanalytic Counseling	Psychoanalytic Counseling
Person-Centered Counseling	Person-Centered Counseling
Gestalt Therapy	Gestalt Therapy
Adlerian Counseling	Adlerian Counseling
Reality Therapy	Reality Therapy
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
Behavior Therapy	Behavior Therapy
Solution-Focused Brief Therapy	Postmodern Approaches
Strengths-Based Counseling	Existential Counseling
Motivational Interviewing	Feminist Therapy
Play Therapy	Family Systems Therapy

We did not randomly assign study participants to course sections, but instead recruited participants already in existing groups based on the university's prescribed counseling program of study. Students in the Counseling Theories courses were in their first year and students in Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents courses were in their second year. No participants were taking both courses at the same time. The flipped Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents course was the only flipped course in the counseling program at the time of the study.

Flipped course sections. The first author taught Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents during the first year of data collection, and the second author taught the course in the second year of data collection. Although the use of different instructors was not intentional (and instead due to hiring changes), the first and second authors used identical flipped learning approaches in an effort to ensure that the change in instructors did not impact the study results. They both used Bergmann and Sam's (2014) traditional flipped learning model when teaching their courses and each recorded their own video lectures using Screencast-O-Matic software. The instructors assigned these video lectures as homework prior to attending class. Students also were required to read selected book chapters and research articles on the course topics. To ensure compliance, the instructors asked students to answer pre-class questions about the topics online before coming to class. Furthermore, students' answers allowed the instructors to evaluate comprehension of the material prior to class and adjust class activities as needed. For example, pre-class questions often asked students to explain key concepts. If the majority of student answers revealed that they had a vague or incorrect understanding of a counseling theory, the instructor allotted more class time to addressing student misunderstanding.

During class, each instructor facilitated a range of activities to help students explore and apply course content. For example, groups of students were asked to rehearse and demonstrate counseling techniques to the class. Students also engaged in large and small group discussions about course topics. They sometimes analyzed case studies and watched videos of counseling demonstrations. Lastly, instructors frequently hosted guest speakers with expertise in the topics. Table 2 includes an example class lesson plan and corresponding assigned homework from an example flipped class the first author taught in Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents.

Table 2

Example Flipped Learning Lesson Plan — Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents

Context	Task	Time Required
Out-of-class	<i>Video lecture</i> – Gestalt and Adlerian Counseling Theories	20 minutes
	<i>Textbook chapters</i> – Gestalt Counseling, Adlerian Counseling	80 minutes
In-class	<i>Welcome</i> – Overview and follow-ups	5 minutes
	<i>Viewing Gestalt Counseling</i> – Students view and discuss two YouTube videos of Gestalt counselors.	20 minutes
	<i>Practicing Gestalt techniques</i> – Students rehearse a role-play of a Gestalt technique and show the technique to the class.	45 minutes
	<i>Guest speaker</i> – Adlerian counselor is guest speaker to describe and discuss his counseling approach.	45 minutes
	<i>Case studies</i> – Students analyze case studies from an Adlerian perspective in groups, then discuss analyses with the class.	30 minutes
	<i>Counseling practice</i> – Students form pairs and practice counseling using an Adlerian or Gestalt approach.	30 minutes
	<i>Closing</i> – Questions and review	5 minutes

Non-flipped course sections. The non-flipped counseling course in this study was Counseling Theories, taught by the same faculty member for both semesters in which the researchers collected data. This faculty member was not an author on the manuscript. Table 1 shows a comparison of the counseling theories taught in the flipped (experimental) and non-flipped (control) counseling courses studied. Students read textbook chapters for homework prior to attending each class. The instructor spent the first half of each class lecturing about the course material, then the second half engaging students in group discussion and hosting guest speakers who were experts in the topics. In this way, the course was not flipped, but it also was not strictly a lecture course. It was “lecture-based,” and regularly involved in-class student activities, as is often the case in counselor education (Cavanagh, 2011; Foldnes, 2016). Table 3 includes an example lesson plan for a non-flipped class session in Counseling Theories.

Table 3

Example Non-Flipped Learning Lesson Plan – Counseling Theories

Context	Task	Time Required
Out-of-class	<i>Textbook chapters</i> – Gestalt Counseling, Adlerian Counseling	80 minutes
In-class	<i>Welcome</i> – Overview and follow-ups	5 minutes
	<i>Lecture</i> – Didactically present information about Gestalt and Adlerian counseling approaches	120 minutes
	<i>Guest speaker</i> – Adlerian counselor is guest speaker to describe and discuss his counseling approach.	45 minutes
	<i>Closing</i> – Questions and review	10 minutes

Data collection. After obtaining IRB approval, we recruited participants during the final week of each semester by explaining the study to course participants. We described the purpose of the study as “to examine student engagement in counseling courses” in an attempt to prevent participant bias that could have emerged if students knew we were studying engagement related to flipped or non-flipped teaching approaches. We informed students that study participation was voluntary and anonymous and emphasized that participation had no impact on course grades. We distributed paper-and-pencil questionnaires to students in both sections of Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents and the first section of Counseling Theories. We distributed the questionnaire electronically to students in the second section of Counseling Theories due to in-person scheduling conflicts. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to participating.

Participants

Sixty-seven master’s students participated in the study. Thirty participants were in the experimental group, completing the flipped theories course (100% participation rate). Thirty-seven participants were in the control group, completing the non-flipped theories course (93% participation rate). Given the first and second authors’ familiarity with the participants as students, we chose not to collect participants’ individual identifying demographic information (including degree specialty)

because doing so might identify students as participants and cause participant bias. For example, a small number of students in the courses identified as male, African American, or Asian American, and if we asked these students to report their demographic information in the study, this information may have unintentionally identified the participants. We can report, though, that the control group participants included first-year school, clinical mental health, couples and family, and addictions counseling students. The experimental group participants included second-year school counseling and school psychology students. The average number of video lectures reportedly viewed by the experimental group participants was 7.4 (out of eight). Video lectures were not a part of the non-flipped course (control group).

Instrumentation

We distributed the Classroom Engagement Inventory (CEI; Wang et al., 2014) to participants to measure student classroom engagement because it comprehensively measures affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. Moreover, it can be used to measure engagement specific to the classroom level, rather than overall school or program engagement (Wang et al., 2014). Although Wang and colleagues (2014) developed the instrument with students in grades 4 through 12, they found that its factor structure was invariant when used with participants of different ages and grade levels, suggesting its relevance in higher education settings.

The CEI consists of five subscales. They are: Affective Engagement (positive emotions students could encounter in class, $\omega = .90$), Behavioral Engagement–Compliance (students' compliance with classroom norms, $\omega = .82$), Behavioral Engagement–Effortful Class Participation (students' self-directed classroom behaviors, $\omega = .82$), Cognitive Engagement (mental effort expended, $\omega = .88$), and Disengagement (cognitive and behavioral aspects of not engaging in class, $\omega = .82$; Wang et al., 2014). Example items are: "I get really involved in class activities" (Behavioral Engagement–Effortful Class Participation), "I feel excited" (Affective Engagement), and "I go back over things when I don't understand" (Cognitive Engagement; Wang et al., 2014, p. 5).

The instrument has 21 items and a 5-point frequency Likert-type scale ranging from *never* to *hardly ever*, *monthly*, *weekly*, and *each day of class*. We adapted the scale to be a 4-point scale by removing the answer choice *each day of class* because both courses only met once per week, therefore *each day of class* was synonymous with *weekly*.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS, we first analyzed internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha to ensure that reducing the 5-point scale to a 4-point scale did not weaken reliability to an unacceptable degree. Then we ran independent samples *t*-tests to test for statistical significance at $p < .05$ in order to determine if experimental and control group scores differed by chance. We also ran Cohen's *d* in SPSS to measure effect size, which quantifies the extent that the control group and experimental group diverged in the study (Thompson, 2006). We followed Cohen's (1969) interpretation guidelines of small (0.2), medium (0.5), and large (0.8) effect sizes. We tested for significance among items grouped by scale, as well as overall measure of classroom engagement.

Results

The internal consistency for our results was deemed acceptable ($\alpha = .85$). We then compared classroom engagement for students in the flipped counseling courses to students in the non-flipped counseling courses in six ways. Table 4 contains a summary of each of these comparisons.

Table 4

Statistical and Practical Significance from Experimental and Control Group Comparisons

CEI Scale	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Affective Engagement	.013	0.61
Behavioral Engagement–Compliance	.038	0.50
Behavioral Engagement–Effortful Class Participation	.344	
Cognitive Engagement	.013	0.64
Disengagement	.005	-0.70
Overall Classroom Engagement	.005	0.70

Affective and Behavioral Engagement

First, we compared the affective engagement between students in the experimental group (flipped) and the control group (non-flipped) courses. Based on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 4 (*weekly*), scores on the Affective Engagement subscale averaged 3.68 ($SD = 0.32$) for the experimental group and 3.44 ($SD = 0.48$) for the control group. This was a statistically significant difference ($p = .013$) with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.61$), indicating that students in the flipped course self-reported significantly more affective engagement than students in the non-flipped course. We also compared Behavioral Engagement–Compliance subscale scores among both groups. Experimental group participants had an average Behavioral Engagement–Compliance score of 3.93 ($SD = 0.18$), whereas control group participants had a lower average Behavioral Engagement–Compliance score of 3.79 ($SD = 0.35$). This was a statistically significant difference ($p = .038$) with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.50$), indicating that students in the flipped course self-reported significantly more behavioral engagement in terms of compliance compared to the students in the non-flipped course. We further compared Behavioral Engagement–Effortful Class Participation subscale scores. Although the average experimental group score for this dimension ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.50$) was higher than the average control group score ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.47$), the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .344$), indicating the students in the flipped counseling course were not significantly different in regards to their reported effort in class.

Cognitive Engagement and Disengagement

Next, we examined cognitive engagement for both groups. Students in the experimental group had an average Cognitive Engagement subscale score of 3.43 ($SD = 0.38$), and those in the control group had a lower average Cognitive Engagement score of 3.13 ($SD = 0.54$). This was a statistically significant difference in cognitive engagement levels ($p = .013$) with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.64$). Students in the flipped course self-reported significantly more cognitive engagement than students in the non-flipped course. We also compared classroom disengagement among participants in both groups. Experimental group participants had an average Disengagement subscale score of 1.81 ($SD = 0.50$), and control group participants had a higher average Disengagement score of 2.25 ($SD = 0.68$). These scores indicate that experimental group participants had lower perceived levels of disengagement, a difference that was statistically significant ($p = .005$) and had a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.70$). In other words, students in the non-flipped course self-reported significantly more disengagement than those in the flipped course.

Overall Classroom Engagement

Lastly, we examined overall classroom engagement between both groups; despite its dimensions, classroom engagement can be considered a single overall construct (Wang et al., 2014). To do so, we

combined and averaged participants' responses for all subscales except Disengagement. This resulted in an Overall Classroom Engagement score of 3.55 ($SD = 0.24$) for the experimental group and 3.34 ($SD = 0.35$) for the control group. These scores represent a statistically significant difference between groups ($p = .005$) with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.70$). That is to say, students in the flipped course had significantly higher perceptions of overall engagement than did the students in the non-flipped course.

Discussion

This study represented the first of its kind comparing students' self-reported engagement in related flipped and non-flipped counseling courses. We sought to answer the question: Do significant differences exist between student classroom engagement levels in flipped counseling course sections and non-flipped counseling course sections? Our hypothesis that the classroom engagement levels of participants in the flipped counseling course sections would be significantly higher statistically than those of participants in the non-flipped counseling course sections was confirmed for all but one of the measures we examined.

Average perceived classroom engagement ratings were relatively high across all sections studied, including the non-flipped sections, with engagement levels measured by the CEI ranging from 3.13 to 3.93. These values indicate that participants perceived themselves to be engaged in their classrooms at least monthly if not weekly. Such high engagement ratings suggest that master's counseling and school psychology students in our sample were generally interested and involved in the learning process in their classrooms. When separated, however, findings indicate that students in the flipped learning course sections may have felt even more frequently engaged than their non-flipped course section counterparts. Specifically, in five of the six measures examined (Affective Engagement, Behavioral Engagement–Compliance, Cognitive Engagement, Disengagement, and Overall Classroom Engagement), participants in the flipped counseling course reported significantly greater classroom engagement than in the non-flipped counseling course. This is the first study in which researchers found increased engagement among a sample of students in a flipped counseling course, and it builds a growing case for flipped learning in counselor education.

Participants in the flipped learning course sections may have reported more frequent classroom engagement given differences in the way class time was spent in the flipped and non-flipped courses. In the flipped course sections, participants spent nominal time in class listening to lecture. Instead, their F2F class time consisted of active application-based activities, such as group discussions, skills practice, and guest speakers. Although participants in the non-flipped course sections also engaged in some of these activities during class (i.e., discussion and guest speakers), they only spent part of class engaged in activities, as at least half of class was reserved for lecture by the instructor. Participants' higher reported classroom engagement in the flipped course sections might indicate that they found a full class period of application-based activities more engaging than spending only part of class on these activities.

Although no previous studies have used the CEI to measure student engagement in flipped and non-flipped counseling courses, researchers have studied student and instructor perceptions of student engagement in flipped classrooms. The overall increased student engagement in the flipped course sections aligns with the findings of Simpson and Richards (2015) and Lucke and colleagues (2017), who found that students reported increased classroom engagement in flipped learning courses. Although we only surveyed students about their perceived classroom engagement, findings also reflect previous research on instructor perceptions that flipped classrooms increase student classroom

engagement (Faculty Focus, 2015; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). For example, in a survey of 1,087 Faculty Focus (2015) readers who utilized flipped learning, 75% of participants indicated observing improved student engagement in flipped classrooms compared to those that were not flipped.

Findings also support previous research indicating that hybrid learning approaches like flipped learning may be more appealing to students than courses held solely online or solely through F2F means. Further research is needed to understand if preferences for flipped learning courses vary by student characteristics, such as working or non-working status. These characteristics have been correlated with preferences for online learning instead of F2F learning, and associations between working status and flipped learning preferences have not previously been examined (Brown, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Paechter et al., 2013; Thai et al., 2017).

One subscale we compared, Behavioral Engagement–Effortful Class Participation, was not significantly different among students in the flipped and non-flipped counseling courses. This construct refers to students' self-directed behavioral engagement in class versus behaviors that are compliant with classroom norms (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2014). Effortful class participation includes self-directed behaviors and efforts to become invested in learning (Wang et al., 2014). It might not have differed among students due to the student population used in this study—graduate counseling and school psychology students. Students were voluntarily pursuing master's degrees in their areas of choice and subsequently had high levels of motivation toward the courses. Students in both sections were likely invested in their coursework, and this investment may not have been affected by whether or not the courses were flipped.

This study's findings add to a growing body of research demonstrating positive findings when flipped courses are compared to non-flipped ones. Researchers have consistently found that students in flipped courses perform better than those in non-flipped courses (Day & Foley, 2006; Foldnes, 2016; Murphy et al., 2016; Thai et al., 2017). Given that higher classroom engagement is associated with better academic performance (O'Brien & Iannone, 2018; Trowler, 2010; Wang et al., 2014), the findings in our study may indicate that flipped learning could lead to enhanced academic performance for counseling students.

In counselor education, our findings provide further tentative support for the use of flipped learning within the discipline. They align with Moran and Milsom's (2015) survey research with school counseling students, Fulton and Gonzalez's (2015) survey research with career counseling students, and Merlin-Knoblich and Camp's (2018) case study with life span students demonstrating positive findings on flipped learning in counselor education. The findings from these studies begin to build a credible case for the positive impact that the flipped learning approach might have on graduate counseling students.

Implications for Counselor Education

Pedagogy

Results of this study beg a larger question about the importance of pedagogy in counselor education. If programs are to graduate competent practitioners into the profession, then they must understand how to optimize students' learning of the counseling discipline. Authors of a journal content analysis of pedagogy in counselor education over a 10-year period revealed that only 14.78% of the articles had a clear basis in learning theory or instructional research (Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, & Yaites, 2014). Other researchers have called for the need for much more attention to

teaching and learning in counselor education (Baltrinic, Jencius, & McGlothlin, 2016; Brackette, 2014; Malott, Hall, Sheely-Moore, Krell, & Cardaciotto, 2014).

Flipped learning is one type of teaching format that is a recognized practice at both the K–12 and undergraduate levels (Kurt, 2017; Sezer, 2016; Zainuddin & Halili, 2016). As students progress in their education, counselor educators need to be aware of how teaching practices must evolve in order to meet the expectations of students at the graduate level. Findings from this study suggest that it is worthwhile to consider flipped learning as a way to engage future students. Furthermore, the significance of findings related to the affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement in flipped learning might be especially important because the practice of counseling requires simultaneous use of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills. The opportunity to preview lecture content before a class allows students to engage in initial cognitive processing and frees up class time for more complex and application tasks engaging with course material (Earley, 2016; Hoffman, 2014; Zainuddin & Halili, 2016). Given the cognitive complexity and skills-oriented nature of counseling courses, it seems preferable to have more time spent on higher-order thinking processes and skills practice. In this way, flipped learning may provide the additional class time needed to increase students' counseling competence.

Counseling Student Competence

Students' counseling competence might manifest in both counseling abilities and academic achievement. Academic achievement in counseling programs is reflected in assignment and course grades, as well as counselor examinations like the National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certification and the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination. Given research in non-counseling disciplines indicating significantly better academic achievement in flipped courses compared to non-flipped courses (Day & Foley, 2006; Foldnes, 2016; Murphy et al., 2016; Thai et al., 2017), counselor educators may want to consider the use of flipped learning in order to improve counseling course grades and exam scores. This improved academic achievement for counseling students could lead to greater numbers of students completing counseling programs and might lead to improved graduation rates among counseling programs with flipped courses.

Counselor Education Training

In addition to the implications for students' learning in the master's-level counseling classroom, this study has implications for the training of current and future counselor educators. Previous literature demonstrates a lack of counselor education's attention to pedagogy and learning theory (Barrio Minton et al., 2014; Brackette, 2014; Malott et al., 2014; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011), much less to teaching approaches like flipped learning. Thus, one might conclude that counseling professors either have had little training in teaching and learning or are not publishing about their training in this area. Thankfully, the 2016 CACREP standards include nine standards that address pedagogy in doctoral programs (CACREP, 2016), whereas the former 2009 standards only included two in this area (CACREP, 2009). It is likely that many counselor education doctoral programs are working to better incorporate the revised standards. As such, program coordinators and faculty would be encouraged to expose doctoral students to the literature on, and examples of, flipped learning. They also would be wise to encourage doctoral students to research and publish on pedagogy in counselor education, including flipped learning, to help fill this gap in previous literature.

Limitations and Future Directions

We recognize limitations in this study that ought to be considered. First, the study was limited by its data collection measures. We measured participants' perceived classroom engagement, which

they reported via questionnaires. This self-report nature could reflect student biases or inaccuracies that observed classroom engagement measures might not reflect. Furthermore, experimental group participants were students in courses taught by the first and second authors, and despite the anonymity assured to participants, they might have felt compelled to provide favorable questionnaire responses. Although we did not collect data on participant demographics to ensure anonymity, this lack of demographic data also serves as a limitation, as such information could inform the interpretation of results. In addition, the study is limited by its two types of data collection, as one class completed the questionnaire electronically, whereas all other participants completed the questionnaire in a paper-and-pencil format.

Second, the courses we compared contained similar, though not identical content. Although the content in both courses was similar, as a causal comparative study, we were unable to manipulate course content to ensure that instructors in both courses delivered identical content. For example, the Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents instructors taught one unit on play therapy, which the Counseling Theories instructor did not teach in her sections.

Third, the flipped course section instructors in this study were different. The first author taught the first flipped learning course section, and one year later, the second author taught the second flipped learning course section. Although they used the same instructional approach, differences in their teaching styles might have impacted student experiences in their courses and consequently, the study results as well. They tried to control for differences in their teaching by meeting to discuss the course and flipped learning teaching in between the two flipped course sections. The first author also shared all course materials (e.g., syllabus, video lectures, lesson plans) with the second author, who used or adapted the materials when she taught the course. We chose not to analyze statistical differences between these course sections due to the small sample size of each section ($n = 17$ and $n = 13$).

In addition, the student composition in the flipped and non-flipped courses varied and sample sizes were limited. Due to the causal comparative method used in the study, sample sizes could not be altered and a post hoc power analysis using G*Power indicated that the observed power in our study was 0.64. Additionally, the Counseling Theories class consisted of first-year counseling students in different specialties, whereas the Theories for Counseling Children and Adolescents course consisted of second-year school counseling and school psychology graduate students. The latter course was required in the program of study of both school counseling and school psychology students, and the former course was required in the program of study of all counseling students. These differences might have contributed to different levels of classroom engagement. Admissions standards are the same for master's counseling and psychology students at the university where the study took place, yet qualitative differences between the counseling and school psychology students might have existed and impacted participants' reported engagement levels. Furthermore, although no previous literature has indicated that classroom engagement is variable by year or specialty in a master's program, school counseling and school psychology students may inherently be more engaged in a course specifically about children and adolescents, compared to counseling students in different counseling specialties in a course about counseling theories applied to any population. Similarly, students in their second year of study in a master's program might be more engaged in classrooms than students in their first year of study because the former are closer to beginning their chosen careers. Students also could have been more engaged in the flipped learning course given that it was the only flipped course in the department at the time this study took place. The novelty of such a class format could have impacted student engagement beyond the nature of the course itself.

Lastly, the CEI was not developed with a sample of graduate students; hence, instrument reliability and validity with this sample is not certain. In their development of the instrument, however, Wang and colleagues (2014) found that the instrument factor structure was invariant by student age, grade level, and other characteristics, indicating it might be statistically sound for populations outside of students in grades 4 through 12.

Despite these limitations, the findings from the study serve as a foundation for continued research. Given that we found significant differences in levels of reported classroom engagement among participants, these differences could be even more substantial if the comparison groups were to consist of identical course content and the same instructor. That is, external validity issues could be reduced if a single instructor taught two sections of the same course, implementing flipped learning in one class but using a traditional lecture-based approach for the other class. An instructor could also teach a flipped counseling course one semester, then teach the same course with a non-flipped approach in a subsequent semester and compare student outcomes from each course.

Future research also could include expanded data collection. In the present study, we distributed the CEI at the end of the semester for all course sections; however, researchers could distribute instruments both during the middle of the semester as well as at the end of the semester to examine significant changes in student engagement. Researchers could also study student outcomes related to flipped learning to assess cognitive changes. For example, does flipped learning impact student achievement? In counselor education, such research could assess student content knowledge through comprehensive exams. Researchers also ought to address the behavioral and affective impacts of flipped learning in counselor education. To examine affective change, researchers could query students about their emotions in flipped counseling courses and how these emotions impact their development as counselors. To assess behavior, researchers could observe counseling students' behaviors in flipped and non-flipped counseling courses, measuring constructs such as class participation and observed engagement. Finally, the counseling profession would benefit from understanding if flipped learning in counselor education impacts the attainment of actual counseling skills. Researchers might assess counseling performances of students in flipped counseling courses versus those in non-flipped courses.

Conclusion

In this causal comparative study, we measured the classroom engagement levels of master's students in flipped and non-flipped counseling classrooms. In all but one area measured, we found that participants in the flipped counseling course sections reported significantly higher classroom engagement than participants in the non-flipped counseling course sections. Such research indicates that students may find the flipped classroom experience more engaging than a classroom experience that is lecture-based. Although this is the first study of its kind in counselor education, findings contribute to a case for the use of flipped learning in counseling courses. Counselor educators will benefit from considering applying flipped learning in the courses they teach.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure

The authors reported no conflict of interest or funding contributions for the development of this manuscript.

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Organizational Variables Contributing to School Counselor Burnout: An Opportunity for Leadership, Advocacy, Collaboration, and Systemic Change



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This study utilizes a correlation matrix to examine relationships between variables identified in literature (role ambiguity, role conflict, assignment of non-counseling duties, coworker and supervisor support, and level of control over time and task) as measured by the Demand Control Support Questionnaire (DCSQ), and elements of school counselor burnout (SCBO) as measured by the Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI) subscales (Exhaustion, Incompetence, Negative Work Environment, Devaluing Clients, and Deterioration in Personal Life). Findings indicate experiencing high external demands, such as assignment of non-counseling duties; experiencing the school as a negative place to work; and experiencing low levels of support from colleagues and supervisors result in high levels of exhaustion and contribute to burnout. These variables need further exploration using a hierarchical multiple regression to analyze the amount of variance they contribute to SCBO. The article includes a discussion of ethical concerns, future research, and practice implications for school counselor educators, supervisors, educational administrators, and school counselors.

Keywords: school counselor burnout, non-counseling duties, role conflict, organizational variables, leadership

School counselors are a valuable resource in supporting a school's mission to help children and adolescents develop into healthy, well-functioning, contributing members of society. However, when school counselors experience high levels of chronic job stress and burnout, those experiences may result in negative effects on the students and schools they serve (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018). Therefore, identifying those variables most likely to contribute to school counselor burnout (SCBO) is crucial for counselor educators' and supervisors' development of prevention, monitoring, and early intervention protocols. With this end in mind, this study is the next in a series of research projects we are pursuing to systematically evaluate variables potentially related to SCBO in order to develop a model of SCBO in the future.

Background of School Counselor Burnout

Research suggests demographic variables potentially contribute to the development of SCBO, including high caseloads (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Gunduz, 2012), location of the school (Butler & Constantine, 2005), grade level served (DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Rayle, 2006), and gender and ethnicity of the counselor (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Falls & Nichter, 2007). However, our recent study utilizing a series of factorial ANOVAs systematically analyzed levels of job stress and burnout in relationship to these variables. The findings indicated, contrary to suggestions in the literature, that none of these variables is significantly related with both job stress and burnout (Holman, Watts, Robles-Pina, & Grubbs, 2018). These findings led us to seek additional potential SCBO contributing variables for exploration. Below we discuss additional variables we identified and how we operationalized them for the current study.

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External Demands

There are several features of external demands highlighted by the literature, which we describe below. Ultimately, we included role ambiguity, assignment of non-counseling duties, and role conflict in the current study.

Role ambiguity. The literature indicates that role ambiguity may contribute to SCBO (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018). School counselors frequently experience situations where various stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, and students, have conflicting ideas about the school counseling role. Differences in understanding the appropriate role of the school counselor is defined as *role ambiguity*.

In addition to these stakeholders, school counselors have their own understanding of their roles. School counselors' conceptualization of their roles is based on their graduate school training (Culbreth et al., 2005; Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Goodman-Scott, 2015; Watkinson, Goodman-Scott, Martin, & Biles, 2017). However, role ambiguity among school counselors might result from lack of clarity from graduate school programs about the unique manifestation of counseling in a school environment, particularly if school counseling classes are add-on classes to clinical mental health coursework (Falls & Nichter, 2007). Additionally, educational administrators often have little if any instruction in their graduate programs regarding how to best utilize a school counselor in helping reach the school's overall mission (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Dodson, 2009; Lieberman, 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). As such, this could be an area of professional advocacy school counselors need to pursue in order to reduce role ambiguity.

Further, the duties assigned by administrators due to role ambiguity are often inconsistent with the American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA; 2012). ASCA's model indicates school counselors should design and deliver comprehensive school counseling programs that promote student achievement. According to ASCA (2012), "school counseling programs are comprehensive in scope, preventative in design and developmental in nature" (p. 1). Appropriate duties include individual student academic program planning; interpreting testing; responsive counseling services related to school participation and achievement; collaboration with teachers, administrators, and parents; identifying and developing programming for student and school needs; advocating for students; and analyzing disaggregated data (ASCA, 2012).

Assignment of non-counseling duties. The assignment of non-counseling duties, those inconsistent with ASCA's National Model (ASCA, 2012), is a significant subset of external demands that negatively impact school counselors (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman, Grubbs, Robles-Pina, Nelson, & Watts, 2019). In fact, several studies have indicated that the assignment of inappropriate non-counseling duties (e.g., master scheduling, substitute teaching, conducting state mandated testing, lunch duty, clerical duties) is a potential variable contributing to SCBO (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Bardhoshi et al., 2014; DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Moyer, 2011).

However, one concern with these studies is the use of the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale's Other Counseling Duties subscale (SCARS; Scarborough, 2005) to operationalize the assignment of non-counseling duties. The SCARS Other Counseling Duties subscale asks counselors to rate how often they participate on committees within the school; coordinate standardized testing programs; organize outreach to low income families; respond to health issues (e.g., check for lice, eye screening, 504 coordination); perform hall, bus, and cafeteria duty; schedule students for class; maintain educational records; handle discipline; and substitute teach.

According to the developer of the instrument, despite the overall strength of the other SCARS subscales, this subscale demonstrates low reliability (Scarborough 2005). It also does not measure the complex and varied external demands that school counselors experience from multiple stakeholders (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Culbreth et al., 2005; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; House & Hayes, 2002). Therefore, in order to measure this construct for the current study, we sought to find another instrument that might measure these non-counseling duties commonly assigned to school counselors. After we discuss the other variables identified as potentially contributing to SCBO, we will discuss a different instrument for operationalizing non-counseling duties.

Role conflict. Role conflict occurs when school counselors experience multiple external demands from a variety of stakeholders (i.e., administrators, parents, teachers, and students). They report feeling so overwhelmed with attempting to meet all of these externally imposed expectations that they have trouble actually following the ASCA model (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018). As a result, school counselors experience job stress from competing externally imposed demands, each exerting pressure on school counselors' limited time and resources.

Control Over School Counselor Tasks and Time

Conflicting external demands can become even more challenging when school counselors believe they do not have the ability to choose which tasks to prioritize or how much time to spend on different tasks. This can occur because building administrators insist the school counselor rigidly adhere to only those tasks the administrator believes are important, many of which may be contrary to the ASCA National Model (Falls & Nichter, 2007). Alternatively, school counselors may experience pressure from a building administrator who prioritizes some activities and a director of guidance who prioritizes completely different activities. School counselors may believe they cannot address student needs or conduct needs-based programming because there simply is not enough time to do so. School counselor job stress research indicated that the level of control counselors experience over how they spend their time might affect their level of job stress (Lee, Cho, Kissinger, & Ogle, 2010). Therefore, this is another potential variable we need to explore in relationship to SCBO.

Coworker Support and Supervision for School Counselors

The SCBO literature identifies two additional related variables, coworker support (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Gunduz, 2012; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Lambie, 2007; Thomas, 2011) and supervisory support (Bardhoshi et al. 2014; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Moyer, 2011; Thomas, 2011), as potentially affecting the development of SCBO. *Coworker support* refers to the quality of relationships school counselors have with their fellow counselors, teachers, and administrators. *Supervisory support* refers to either the school counselor's administrative supervisor or a clinical supervisor, which varies from school to school and district to district. Some school counselors have only a building administrator with little other supervisory support, while others have fellow counselors, perhaps even senior school counselors, whom they rely on for clinical supervision. Some districts have directors of guidance who act as school counselor supervisors. Regardless of how support structures are manifest in schools, the support variable, including both perceived support from colleagues and supervisory support, needs to be explored in relationship to SCBO.

Methods

We first obtained Institutional Review Board approval. Our research question was: What is the relationship of external demands on time, perceived control over work duties, and colleague and

supervisor support with school counselor burnout symptomology? This current study builds on our previous research examining potential demographic variables identified in the literature as potential predictor variables for SCBO. In this study, we explored the significance, strength, and direction of the correlations between role ambiguity, role conflict, and assignment of non-counseling duties, measured by the Demand Control Support Questionnaire (DCSQ) Demand subscale; perceived control school counselors have over how their time is spent on the job, measured by the DCSQ Control subscale; school counselors' perceptions regarding the level of support they experience from supervisors and colleagues, measured by the DCSQ Supervisor and Colleague Support subscale; and levels of SCBO measured by the Counselor Burnout Inventory (CBI) subscales. We intend to utilize the findings of this and our previous research to develop a model of SCBO in the future.

Participants

A priori, we conducted a power analysis determining that we needed 174 participants for sufficient power ($\alpha < .05$, $\beta = .8$), with a medium effect size (GPower, 2008). We solicited participants by sending emails with a link to our consent and survey to all school counselors in the state of Texas from a list provided by the Texas Education Agency. Employing a criterion sampling strategy, we only included those who met the following criteria: (a) certified school counselor in Texas, and (b) working in a public elementary, middle, or high school (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). Our non-random sample of 449 school counselors is representative of the population of Texas certified school counselors with most being White (81%), followed by smaller groups of Black (10%) and Hispanic (9%) counselors. Most (93%) reported having master's degrees with the remainder holding educational specialist or doctoral degrees.

The sample represents elementary school (43%), middle school (22%), and high school (35%) counselors. Most of the counselors worked in suburban locations (47%), with rural (28%) and urban (26%) almost evenly split to make up the remainder of the sample. They reported working in schools ranging in size from 100 to 3,400 students. Over half the counselors responding reported caseloads of over 400 (53%), with those reporting 251–400 students (35%) as the next largest group, and those with less than 250 (11%) being the least represented group. The mean age of the participants was 44 years, with an average of 13 years' experience in educational settings. Almost half (43%) were school counselors for 5 years or less. A quarter (25%) reported being counselors between 6 and 10 years, and 32% reported having at least 11 years' experience as a school counselor.

Instruments

The current study gathered demographic data in addition to utilizing two instruments. The first is the DCSQ (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and the second is the CBI (Lee et al., 2007).

DCSQ. The DCSQ (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) is a 30-item scale measuring "psychological work demands, job control and workplace social support" (Williams, Sundelin, & Schmuck, 2001, p. 71). It is the most recent iteration of a scale measuring job demands and psychological workload, decision latitude or control over tasks, and coworker and supervisory support on the job. The goal of the instrument, according to the developers, is "gathering objective data about work environments relevant for prevention-oriented goals of improving social and psychological working conditions" (Karasek et al., 1998; p. 328). It is self-administered and takes approximately 15 minutes to complete (Karasek, 1979; Karasek et al., 1998; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Participants rate each statement on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*. The subscales used in our study measure external demands (9 questions), perceived control (9 questions), and supervisor and coworker support (11 questions).

Multiple studies conducting exploratory factor analyses on the questionnaire support the dimensional structure (Cheng, Luh, & Guo, 2003; Choobineh, Ghaem, & Ahmedinejad, 2011; de Araújo & Karasek, 2008; Edimansyah, Rusli, Naing, & Mazalisah, 2006; Eum et al., 2007; Gimeno, Benavides, Amick, Benach, & Martínez, 2004; Gomez-Ortiz & Moreno, 2009; Kawakami, Kobayashi, Araki, Haratani, & Furui, 1995; Li, Yang, Liu, Xu, & Choi, 2004; Mase et al., 2012; Nehzat, Huda, & Tajuddin, 2014). In a recent study, both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis examined goodness of fit using the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, finding the values indicate good (.08) to excellent (.05) fit (Santos, Carvalho, & de Araújo, 2016). Additionally, research analyzing the data using a Comparative Fit Index and Tucker-Lewis Index compared the hypothetic model with independent variables finding both indices vary from 0 to 1 and values were above .90, indicating adequate fit (Santos, et al., 2016). They also established composite reliability for each factor loading and respective measurement error at or above .70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Santos et al., 2016). Finally, research has demonstrated adequate performance in discriminant validity (Santos et al., 2016).

According to Karasek and colleagues (1998), the coefficients on each subscale indicate strong internal consistency: Demand (.71–.79), Control (.80–.84), and Supervisor and Coworker Support (.72–.85). Additionally, the “internal consistency of the scales tend to be similar across populations and between men and women” (Karasek et al., 1998, p. 336). The Cronbach’s alphas coefficient for women is .73 and for men is .74, both within acceptable ranges (Karasek et al., 1998). Additionally, several studies support the reliability of the scale format we used in our study (Kawakami & Fujigaki, 1996; Kawakami et al., 1995).

CBI. The CBI (Lee et al., 2007) is a 20-item self-report instrument measuring counselor burnout. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 5 (*always true*). A distinguishing feature of the CBI is that it includes both personal and organizational factors in determining level of burnout, whereas the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) uses a model of burnout exclusive of organizational factors (Maslach, 1982; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996, 1997). This is significant given that the literature indicates organizational factors, such as external demand on school counselor’s time spent on non-counseling duties (e.g., car duty, scheduling, test administration), as contributing to school counselor burnout (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Culbreth et al., 2005; DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Falls & Nichter, 2007; Lambie, 2007; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016; Rayle, 2006; Thompson & Powers, 1983; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006).

The CBI developers established initial psychometrics using an exploratory factor analysis to evaluate construct validity and confirmed their findings with a second exploratory factor analysis. They identified five factors accounting for 66.9% of the total variance in school counselor burnout. Factor 1 is Negative Work Environment (NWE). This subscale includes items such as, “I feel frustrated with the system in my workplace,” thus measuring stress attributed to the work environment other than personal and interpersonal problems. Factor 2 is Devaluing Clients, which includes items such as, “I am no longer concerned about the welfare of my clients,” thus measuring a counselor’s challenges with connecting empathically with student clients. Factor 3 is Deterioration in Personal Life. This subscale includes items such as, “I feel I do not have enough time to spend with my friends,” thus measuring counselor’s perceptions of job-related stress on their personal life. Factor 4 is Exhaustion, including items such as, “Due to my job as a counselor I feel tired most of the time,” thus measuring physical and emotional exhaustion attributed to the job. Finally, Factor 5 is Incompetence. This subscale includes items such as, “I feel I am an incompetent counselor,” thus measuring the counselor’s self-perception of effectiveness on the job. Internal consistency of subscales is acceptable, ranging between .73 and .85 (Lee et al., 2007).

Initially, the instrument developers analyzed the psychometric properties of the CBI with two samples. Although not designed specifically to measure burnout among school counselors, the first sample of 258 counselors included 32.6% professional school counselors, and the second sample of 132 contained 43.2% professional school counselors (Lee et al., 2007, p. 144). Further, researchers validated the instrument with several counseling subspecialties, including school counselors (Lee et al., 2010; O'Sullivan & Bates, 2014). One study of the CBI with 272 school counselors using confirmatory factor analysis found the factor structure valid for use specifically with school counselors (Gnilka, Karpinski, & Smith, 2015). Additionally, test-retest reliability using a 6-week interval demonstrates strong reliability with subscale Cronbach alphas ranging from .72 to .85 (Lee et al., 2007). Finally, both concurrent validity (Lee et al., 2007; Wallace, Lee, & Lee, 2010) and discriminant validity (Lee et al., 2007; O'Sullivan & Bates, 2014; Puig et al., 2012) are well established.

Data Collection

Consistent with our approved protocol, we sent a survey link through Survey Monkey to all school counselor emails provided by the Texas Education Agency. We believe that school counselors suffering burnout are less likely to self-select without an additional incentive to participate because of the negative effects of burnout; therefore, they are more likely to be professionally disengaged. As such, we offered an incentive \$50 gift certificate drawing for those choosing to participate and who provided their contact information at the end of the survey. According to Dillman (2014), the offer of an incentive is likely to improve the response rate and inclusion of participants that would not otherwise self-select to take the survey. After reading and agreeing to the consent document, participants completed an online survey comprised of the demographic questionnaire, the DCSQ, and the CBI.

Data Analysis

We downloaded the data from Survey Monkey to Excel and transferred it to SPSS. Once transferred, we eliminated any participants with missing data, leading to our final sample described above. We then conducted descriptive statistics including measures of central tendency, variability and dispersion, distributional shape, and histograms to evaluate normality, in order to ensure that the data collected is appropriate for the analysis conducted. After establishing that the data met the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity, we calculated the reliability coefficients for each of the instruments, namely the DCSQ and CBI, to evaluate their reliability. Once satisfied that each instrument demonstrated adequate reliability coefficients (.70 or higher), we conducted a Pearson's product moment correlation to explore the relationships between the subscales for each instrument (Field, 2005). We examined the correlation matrix to evaluate evidence of multicollinearity, looking for correlations between two scales of .80 or higher. There were no subscales in the correlation matrix indicating multicollinearity.

Results

The reliability of the DCSQ and CBI subscales is documented in Table 1, and the relationships between the subscales is documented in Table 2. The DCSQ Demand subscale indicated a significant relationship to each CBI subscale; however, only four of them are large enough to interpret. These included a significant positive relationship between the Demand subscale and the CBI Exhaustion subscale ($r = .608, p < .01$), the CBI Incompetence subscale ($r = .297, p < .01$), the CBI NWE subscale ($r = .517, p < .01$), and the CBI Deterioration in Personal Life subscale ($r = .518, p < .01$). Although low, the Demand subscale also demonstrated significant negative relationships to the DCSQ Coworker and Supervisor Support subscale ($r = -.272, p < .01$). Therefore, increases in external demands placed on school counselors will likely result in higher levels of exhaustion, feelings of incompetence, experience of their work environment

as negative, and deterioration in their personal lives. However, with increasing levels of coworker and supervisory support, external demands may have less impact on school counselors.

Table 1

DCSQ Subscale Reliability

Subscale	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items	Number of Items
DCSQ Control	.171	.145	9
DCSQ Demand	.807	.813	9
DCSQ Coworker Support	.828	.843	6
DCSQ Supervisor Support	.891	.890	5
DCSQ Support	.907	.909	11
CBI Exhaustion	.895	.900	4
CBI Incompetence	.730	.733	4
CBI Negative Work Environment	.828	.827	4
CBI Devaluing Clients	.743	.759	4
CBI Deterioration in Personal Life	.837	.836	4

Table 2

Correlation Matrix (DCSQ and CBI Subscales)

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Control	1	-.246**	.294**	-.153**	-.106*	-.330**	-.038	-.181**
2. Demand	-.246**	1	-.272**	.608**	.297**	.517**	.142**	.518**
3. Support	.294**	-.272**	1	-.224**	-.166**	-.646**	-.221**	-.252**
4. Exhaustion	-.153**	.608**	-.224**	1	.430**	.539**	.161**	.717**
5. Incompetence	-.106*	.297**	-.166**	.430**	1	.464**	.409**	.435**
6. New	-.330**	.517**	-.646**	.539**	.464**	1	.314**	.552**
7. Devaluing Clients	-.038	.142**	-.221**	.161**	.409**	.314**	1	.277**
8. Deter in Pers Life	-.181**	.518**	-.252**	.717**	.435**	.552**	.277**	1

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

The Control subscale demonstrated significant negative correlations with the Demand ($r = -.246$, $p < .01$), Exhaustion ($r = -.153$, $p < .01$), Incompetence ($r = -.106$, $p < .05$), and Deterioration in Personal Life ($r = -.181$, $p < .01$) subscales, and demonstrated a significant positive relationship with Coworker

and Supervisor Support ($r = .294, p < .01$). However, only the NWE subscale ($r = -.330, p < .01$) correlation is large enough to interpret, increased control being significantly negatively correlated with NWE. Although the other correlations are low, there may be interaction effects that warrant future exploration. Therefore, the data suggested that with increased control over how school counselors spend their time, they are impacted less by external demands. They also experienced lower levels of exhaustion, feelings of incompetence, and deterioration in their personal lives. Working in an NWE results in school counselors feeling they have significantly less control over their day-to-day work.

The DCSQ Coworker and Supervisor Support subscale was significantly negatively related to the Demand ($r = -.272, p < .01$), Exhaustion ($r = -.224, p < .01$), Incompetence ($r = -.166, p < .01$), Devaluing Clients ($r = -.221, p < .01$), and Deterioration in Personal Life ($r = -.252, p < .01$) subscales. However, only the NWE subscale correlation was large enough to interpret ($r = -.646, p < .01$). The Coworker and Supervisor Support subscale is significantly positively related to Control ($r = .294, p < .01$). These data indicate that increased perceptions of support from coworkers and supervisors decrease school counselors' negative experience of external demands on their day-to-day work. They also feel lower levels of exhaustion, incompetence, experiences of devaluing their students, and deterioration in their personal lives. Similar to the Control variable discussed above, experiences of coworker and supervisory support are perceived to be lower when school counselors experience their work environments as negative.

Discussion and Implications

Although this study was formulated to expand research regarding demographic variables related to school counselor burnout, they were not found to be significant (Holman et al., 2018). Therefore, the current study focused on exploring organizational variables that may contribute to SCBO. After evaluating the literature, we identified the variables of role ambiguity, role conflict, and assignment of non-counseling duties, which we operationalized using the DCSQ Demand subscale; coworker and supervisory support, which we operationalized using the DCSQ Support subscale; and the level of control school counselors perceive they have over their time and tasks, which we operationalized using the DCSQ Control subscale.

We utilized a correlation matrix to explore relationships between these variables and the subscales of the CBI, which is a valid and reliable measure of SCBO. Our findings indicated organizational variables including high external demands, such as assignment of non-counseling duties; experiencing the school as a negative place to work; and experiencing low levels of support from colleagues and supervisors resulted in high levels of exhaustion and contributed to burnout. These variables need further exploration in future research using a hierarchical multiple regression to analyze the amount of variance they contribute to SCBO. This can provide school counselor educators, supervisors, school administrators, and school counselors with valuable information on the best areas of focus for prevention and intervention activities.

External Demands

The Demand subscale consistently demonstrates the strongest correlations across the matrix. This subscale measures psychological work overload and job conflict that result from role ambiguity such as the assignment of non-counseling duties. Items included whether the job requires employees to "work fast" or "work hard," perception of "no excessive work," having "enough time" to complete tasks, experiencing "conflicting demands" or frequent "task interruption," experiencing the job as "hectic," or that they have to "wait on others" to complete their job (Karasek et al., 1998).

Research on school counselor role ambiguity supports work overload and job conflict as both antecedents and consequences of role ambiguity in cyclical fashion (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Additionally, our previous research supports the likelihood of interactions between these constructs, indicating that the DCSQ Demand subscale measures the assignment of non-counseling duties due to role ambiguity, thus resulting in role conflict and work overload (Holman et al., 2019). Role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload interact to contribute to SCBO (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Maslach, 1982; Selye, 1976).

Given these data, we recommend school counselor educators and supervisors consider integrating ways to manage psychological workload in their pedagogical development of emerging school counselors. In addition, we recommend school counseling professionals self-monitor levels of psychological workload in order to identify job stress early and intervene through being proactive in planning self-care activities and continually monitoring levels of job stress so that early intervention and remediation is possible. School counselor educators, supervisors, and school counselors also should consider methods for systematically educating stakeholders on the appropriate role of a school counselor and advocate for that role. One way to do so is to utilize data-driven methods such as needs assessments and both formative and summative program evaluation measures.

By engaging in data-driven practice, school counselors have the necessary tools to communicate their roles and their worth to important stakeholders. School counselors should be proactive in reporting results from formative and summative program evaluation to stakeholders. This is consistent with the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012); however, school counselors likely increase their burnout risk when they continue to wait for administrators to direct them in which activities they will perform. We recommend that school counselors take command of their role by approaching the job from a professional school counselor mindset that demonstrates their role through action, rather than waiting to respond to others' perceptions of their role.

Coworker and Supervisory Support

Perceiving higher levels of coworker and supervisory support has a significant inverse relationship with the level of external demands the school counselor experiences on the job. This likely makes sense when we consider that the demands most often prioritized by school counselors are those that come from supervisors. This is consistent with previous literature that found coworker and supervisory support mediates SCBO (Falls & Nichter, 2007). Although significant, the level is just under .3. Given that support is significantly related to a decrease in SCBO, it is important to include the variable in a future regression analysis; however, based on the small correlation, this variable is likely to account for less variance in SCBO than some may hypothesize. The largest relationship involving level of support is the fact that when school counselors perceive they have low levels of support, they experience their work settings in a negative light. It is difficult with this limited data to understand whether the low support results in feeling negative about the work environment or vice versa. This is an area for exploration in the future, as it could provide important information about potential prevention.

Potential Effects of SCBO

Our research suggests that having a negative experience of one's school environment is very important because it negatively impacts school counselors' levels of student engagement and competency on the job. Additionally, the data indicated that school counselors working in a negative school environment not only experience high levels of exhaustion but also demonstrate a significant deterioration in their personal lives. The seminal literature on burnout among professionals who are not school counselors has extensively documented the physical, psychological, and interpersonal

effects of job stress and burnout (e.g., Maslach, 1982; Selye, 1976). Additionally, preliminary research on SCBO indicated that school counselors report similar negative physical and psychological experiences resulting from job stress (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018). These include developing high blood pressure, overeating, engaging in substance abuse, developing insomnia, and exacerbation of mental health issues related to mood disorders and anxiety (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman & Grubbs, 2018).

Our study supports this existing research that there is a positive relationship between deterioration in personal life and burnout. Given both anecdotal experiences and decades of research on stress and burnout, these results probably seem obvious. However, the impact of SCBO on school counselors' personal and professional lives, and specifically on the schools and students they serve, needs further examination in research uniquely focused on these topics.

Deterioration in personal life. If we value the professional school counselors who provide supportive services for our schools, students, teachers, and parents, we should be concerned with their well-being. Counselor educators, supervisors, and those stakeholders who advocate for support of school counselors must actively demonstrate the value we have for school counselors. As such, we recommend that school counselor educators and supervisors develop intentional educational advocacy activities to teach the myriad of stakeholders in our communities about the effective role of school counselors. We tend to do a good job through our professional organizations lobbying for funding for school counselors. However, we do not always adequately educate school administrators, specifically, on the appropriate roles for a school counselor and on how utilizing school counselors in these roles ultimately benefits the school's mission of developing healthy, knowledgeable, and well-functioning members of society who contribute to a positive community climate.

Professional incompetence. The Incompetence subscale utilized in our study was significantly related to experiencing low levels of control over time and tasks, and low levels of support. Responses also demonstrated significant relationships with feeling high levels of external demands on time, experiencing exhaustion, perceiving one's school environment as negative, devaluation of students, and deterioration in their personal lives. Although professional school counselors in previous studies have indicated that they do not view themselves as incompetent, measured as low sense of personal accomplishment by the MBI (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Lambie, 2007; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), our findings demonstrated a positive relationship between feelings of incompetence and SCBO.

One potential reason might be that the CBI, as an alternative measure normed specifically on school counselors, may provide a more nuanced and accurate method for measuring this construct. However, future research should examine this, determining whether these findings warrant this conclusion. It is our belief that there is a complex interplay of factors not yet identified in the literature which may improve our understanding of this variable. Therefore, future research should examine the development of school counselor incompetence more closely to gain a better understanding of how it manifests among this population.

We believe another interpretation for conflicting results on reported levels of incompetence among school counselors is that they do not view themselves as incompetent or lacking professional ability. Rather, they view themselves as being externally prevented from using the counseling skills they have. This happens due to conflicting external demands involving assignment of non-counseling duties prioritized as more important than counseling-specific duties (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman et al., 2019).

Regardless, if using the CBI to monitor SCBO levels, high scores on the Incompetence subscale would suggest school counselors are experiencing professional impairment. As a result, they are at risk of unethical behavior that may cause harm to students and schools. These risks include developing compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma, developing mental health or substance abuse issues that may impact performance, or even engaging in boundary violations with students through inappropriate relationships. Thus, we recommend school counselor educators, supervisors, and school districts monitor this as a form of risk management through periodic surveys or regular supervisory sessions where directors of guidance and administrators can gather qualitative data about levels of job stress in school counselors' experience. We argue that once high levels of incompetence develop, the counselor is likely experiencing burnout requiring significant intervention, which might include taking a sabbatical or supervisors counseling these impaired professionals out of the profession. We emphasize the importance of prevention and early intervention in order to avoid school counselors developing high levels of incompetence.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study has several potential limitations, including that self-report research may result in respondents answering based on social desirability, or they might exaggerate their experiences. However, most of our limitations stem primarily from the limited school counseling sample. For reliable generalization beyond the population of school counselors in Texas, future research needs to evaluate these variables with school counselors in other geographic areas. Doing so might reflect differences across the diverse population of school counselors. Similarly, Caucasian participants (81%) are overwhelmingly represented in our sample. Although this may be consistent with the population of Texas school counselors, the sample does not represent the total population of school counselors to which we wish to generalize. Therefore, future research should seek to develop more ethnically diverse samples when replicating this study.

In addition, almost half our sample (43%) were elementary school counselors; therefore, future researchers should examine differences between counselors in elementary, middle, and high school levels in relationship to these predictor variables, perhaps conducting separate studies with each level to determine how much variance demand, control, and supervision or support variables impact SCBO among each of these groups. This is particularly salient in light of concerns about role ambiguity and role conflict developing out of discrepancies between school counselor training and actual duties on the job. In fact, research indicates that training for school counselors on level-specific (elementary and secondary) issues and activities has decreased over time from 14% of programs in 2000 to 2% in 2010 (Pérusse, Goodnough, & Noël, 2001; Pérusse, Poynton, Parzych, & Goodnough, 2015). Further, Goodman-Scott (2015) found no significant differences in recently graduated school counselors regarding content of coursework preparing them for elementary versus secondary placements. In fact, research has indicated that counselor educators preparing school counselors for elementary school positions make pedagogical decisions (e.g., what material to teach in classes and what classes to offer) primarily due to external influences like licensure requirements and job openings, rather than developmental needs of emerging school counselors (Goodman-Scott, Watkinson, Martin, & Biles, 2016). Therefore, future research also might examine interaction effects between grade level training and actual duties in relationship to burnout.

Similarly, future researchers should examine differences between urban, suburban, and rural locations in relationship to the predictor variables measured in the current study, given that almost half the sample (47%) worked in suburban locations. Again, separate studies may provide better

information about differences between location of the school and school counselors' experiences regarding the impact of external demands, decision latitude (control), and levels of perceived support or supervision on development of SCBO, if any exist.

Over half of our sample (53%) had caseloads of 400 or more, which is larger than that recommended by the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012). Although this may be common across the country, we suggest future research test whether these high caseloads may interact with other variables to influence the developmental trajectory of job stress. Therefore, future research should examine school counselors' caseloads as they interact with levels of external demands, decision latitude, supervision, and colleague support to gain a more nuanced understanding of how these variables interact to influence development of SCBO.

Finally, interaction effects between these variables and identification of potential mediating and moderating variables will provide nuance in our understanding of diverse developmental trajectories of SCBO. By further exploring these, we may identify improved methods of monitoring, prevention, and early intervention, which can all work to support and sustain quality school counselors.

Conclusion

This project was the next one in a series of systematic studies evaluating potential contributing variables suggested in the SCBO literature. Given the serious potential impact of burnout on sustaining school counselors and on potential competency issues discussed above, which could violate school counselors' ethical duty to promote student welfare, it is crucial that we understand the development of burnout in this counselor population. Our exploration of demographic variables indicated none of these significantly relate to development of job stress and burnout for school counselors surveyed, contrary to suggestions in previous literature (Holman et al., 2018). However, the current study demonstrated several variables that do correlate with school counselor burnout.

Stakeholders who demonstrate a lack of understanding about the appropriate role and duties of school counselors should be aware of conflicting demands on counselors' time that increase job stress. These include inappropriate duties such as substitute teaching, standardized test administration, master scheduling, and disciplining students. As a result, these counselors experience high levels of psychological stress and emotional exhaustion, consistent with the traditional model of burnout discussed in the literature. Stress and exhaustion have negative effects on counselors' personal and professional lives. Their experiences of stress are further exacerbated when they experience low levels of support from coworkers and supervisors. The combination of low support with high demands and low control over decision making likely contributes to school counselors' experiencing their school environment negatively. External demands, emotional exhaustion, deterioration in personal life, low support and supervision, and NWE are potential predictor variables that might contribute to development of school counselor burnout and need further evaluation in future research.

Due to the results of this and previous studies, we recommend school counselors take the following steps to reduce the negative effects of stress that can result in burnout. Counselors should intentionally pursue preventative self-care planning and continual monitoring of stress levels with early intervention and remediation when heightened stress is identified. Additionally, we recommend school counselors be conscientious about engaging in data-driven practice for self-advocacy with stakeholders in order to improve stakeholder awareness of appropriate school counseling activities. We recommend that counselor educators develop pedagogical supports

and induction practices that might serve to inoculate emerging school counselors to the typical stressors experienced in this professional role. Finally, we recommend ongoing supports, including consultation, supervision, networking, and personal counseling, when necessary to help school counselors manage stress levels. Future research should develop a model of school counselor burnout and explore potential mediating variables and interaction effects between variables. Doing so can inform future prevention and intervention efforts.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure

The authors reported no conflict of interest or funding contributions for the development of this manuscript.

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Defining Moment Experiences of Professional Counselors: A Phenomenological Investigation



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A *defining moment experience* is a pinnacle moment or critical incident that occurs within a therapeutic context and contributes significantly to the professional development and personal growth of counselors. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate how experienced counselors make sense and meaning of their defining moment experiences in terms of developing their clinical attributes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine experienced professional counselors to investigate how defining moment experiences influenced their professional development. Five main themes were derived from analysis via interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): acceptance reality, finding a balance, enhanced self-reflection and awareness, reciprocal transformation, and assimilation and integration. These themes provide perspectives on how facilitating conversations and reflection on defining moment experiences may enhance professional development and clinical attributes among counselors.

Keywords: defining moment experiences, professional development, clinical attributes, qualitative study, interpretative phenomenological analysis

The *defining moment experience* is a contemporary term to describe a pinnacle moment or critical incident that occurs within a therapeutic context and contributes to professional development and the personal growth of professional counselors (Prengel & Somerstein, 2013; Veach & LeRoy, 2012). The defining moment experience typically occurs in the early stages of counselor development and is considered a rite of passage, often serving as a catalyst for significant growth (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001; Skovholt, 2012; Skovholt & McCarthy, 1988). A negative defining moment experience might entail initial exposure to a difficult client, which may have a negative influence on counselor perceptions of clinical competency. In contrast, a positive defining moment experience could involve a novice counselor's first experience of effectiveness or making a therapeutic breakthrough with a client (Skovholt, 2012). Whether positive or negative, defining moment experiences provide great potential for counselor self-reflection and growth on professional and personal levels (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006).

Defining moment experiences are more likely to occur and have greatest influence among novice and early-career counselors from a counselor developmental perspective (Lee et al., 2001). In theory, novice counselors face several stressors, such as performance anxiety, rigid emotional boundaries, an incomplete practitioner-self, glamorized expectations, and inadequate conceptual maps (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Defining moment experiences are likely to intensify these stressors and existing growing pains in terms of confidence and perceptions of identity within the counseling profession (Patterson & Levitt, 2011). Novice counselors also may find themselves deeply questioning their personal beliefs, biases, and assumptions, which can lead to some level of personal transformation or significant growth (Skovholt,

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2012). Nevertheless, Furr and Carroll (2003) argued that the first defining moment experience carries the potential to accelerate counselor development regarding their behaviors (e.g., performance-based skills), cognitions (e.g., simple to complex), and emotions (e.g., feelings of inferiority or self-efficacy).

Several research studies have confirmed these propositions. Indeed, Bischoff, Barton, Thober, and Hawley (2002) reported that the initial counseling session with a client was a defining moment experience among early-career counselors having both a positive and negative influence on their self-efficacy. Similarly, Furr and Carroll (2003) reported direct client experience to be a defining moment in the development of counseling students, leading them to increased self-understanding and confidence as well as recognition of personal deficiencies. A qualitative study by Howard et al. (2006) also investigated defining moment experiences among practicum counseling students as they pertained to their overall professional growth. The findings suggested defining moment experiences influenced their professional identity, personal reactions, competence, supervision processes, and counseling philosophy.

Defining moment experiences also have been found to be important in the ongoing development of professional counselors (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). In their study over 30 years ago, Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) asked 58 mental health professionals with varying degrees of experience and credentials to submit narrative accounts of their own defining moment experiences. Common themes developed from the narratives included feelings of insecurity, learning to accept imperfections and limitations, transforming the experience into a specialty, the attitude of readiness to learn and grow from the experience, and dealing with unexpected events such as the suicide of a client. More recently, Veach and LeRoy (2012) reported several common themes in the defining moment essays of 37 professional counselors, including increased empathy, authenticity, honesty, self-awareness, resilience, compassion, connection, courage, and commitment. Two other publications (Prengel & Somerstein, 2013; Trotter-Mathison, Koch, Sanger, & Skovholt, 2010) have similarly used personal narratives of professional counselors to illustrate the significance of defining moment experiences in the ongoing development of counselors.

Theories of counselor development maintain that the process of growth and change continues throughout the career lifespan of counseling professionals, but may nonetheless entail different challenges at distinct stages of counselor development (Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003; Zahm, Veach, Martyr, & LeRoy, 2016). For novice counselors, defining moment experiences are likely to intensify pre-existing stressors and provide a significant opportunity for professional development (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). In contrast, experienced counselors are more likely to be able to reflect and process the latent meanings of defining moment experiences for their own ongoing professional growth and development (Moss et al., 2014), making them a valuable resource for understanding the developmental effects of defining moment experiences. Yet there is little systematic research on how defining moment experiences contribute to the practice of experienced professional counselors. This study addressed this shortfall in the research literature by focusing on the following research question: How do experienced counselors make sense and meaning of their defining moment experiences with respect to their professional development and practice?

Method

A qualitative research design was employed in this study and incorporated interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the defining moment experiences of professional counselors (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The IPA approach was considered a suitable methodology to reveal the complex issues associated with the defining moment experiences of counseling

professionals, as it enables a rich level of data collection and interpretation by studying people ideographically (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data by providing participants the opportunity to discuss their defining moment experiences and give voice to their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes formed as a result of the experience.

Research Team

The research team consisted of the first author, a research assistant, and an external auditor. None of the research team were in a dependent relationship or received monetary compensation for their work, and only the first author was significantly connected to the topic of defining moment experiences. The first author and principal investigator (PI) holds a doctorate in counselor education and supervision and is a licensed professional counselor with over 20 years' experience. The external auditor is a doctorate-level clinician with over 20 years' experience, significant knowledge of IPA methods, and no vested interest in the study. The research assistant (RA) is a retired English professor who has familiarity with and understanding of qualitative data analysis. The RA was intentionally selected to provide independent data analysis, as she had no counseling background.

Participants

The study consisted of a purposive sample of nine experienced professional counselors who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) have a minimum of 10 years' professional counseling experience, (b) be an active licensed professional counselor, and (c) experienced a defining moment in the role of counselor and expressed willingness to share related thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Participant demographics are displayed in Table 1 with respect to the pseudonym each counselor selected for the study, along with a description of their defining moment experience and their varied backgrounds in terms of gender, age, race, experience, and the nature of their reported defining moment experiences.

Procedure

University IRB approval to conduct the study was received. An invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview on the defining moment experiences of professional counselors was advertised on the state therapist listserv as well as other established mental health agencies and professional counseling listservs limited to the southeast region of the United States. Participants also were recruited via the snowball method by initial contacts for referrals or recommendations for potential interview subjects.

Participants received a paper copy of the informed consent for review and signature prior to the start of each scheduled interview wherein participants were provided with a definition of defining moment experiences. Each participant chose a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality and, in accordance with Standard G.2.f. of the American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014), the location, time, and format (by phone or in-person) of the interview honored each participant's schedule and preferences. Moreover, interviews were conducted in a private space to maintain confidentiality and be free from distractions. Each interview was audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Two interviews were conducted in person, and seven interviews were conducted over the telephone.

Prior to their interview, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Each interview consisted of 12 open-ended questions (see Table 2), with the five main questions being: (1) Tell me about a defining moment that occurred while working with a client(s). (2) How did this experience shape how you saw yourself as a professional counselor? (3) How did this experience shape your sense of clinical competency? (4) How did you regard the therapeutic relationship between client and counselor prior to your defining moment experience? (5) As you reflect on your defining moment experience, how has

your perspective changed or not changed? Sub-questions also were asked to illicit the meaning and sense attributed to defining moment experiences. Each interview question was presented in the same order with each participant for consistency (Creswell, 2007). Follow-up impromptu questions were asked in between the established questions to obtain richer, more elaborate details or context, as needed. Each interview progressed at a pace that was set by the participant, allowing for the development of more elaborate data with each question (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Defining Moment Experience

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Race	Years of Experience	Description of Defining Moment Experience
Ellen	F	65+	Caucasian	21–29	Couples counseling with a female client in danger
John	M	65+	Caucasian	10–15	Counseling a non-mainstream client (LGBT)
Ace	F	65+	African American	30+	Counseling a teenage sexual abuse victim
Alaina	F	55–64	African American	21–29	Counseling a WWII survivor
Lee	M	45–54	Caucasian	16–20	Being “fired” by a client
Gina	F	45–54	African American	10–15	Stepping outside the boundaries to help a client face school anxiety
Gretchen	F	45–54	Caucasian	16–20	Suicidal client who experienced child abuse
Jon	M	55–64	Caucasian	10–15	Counseling a client with addiction problems
Jackie	F	35–44	African American	10–15	Client discontinued treatment after a firm boundary was set

A range of procedural steps were taken to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to counter any potential researcher biases (Morrow, 2005). To establish the credibility of the findings, descriptive field notes were taken during interviews to document observations and add context to the audio data. The field notes emphasized participant content, expressed meaning and PI observations (Creswell, 2007), and provided a means to confirm interpretations of interview data through data triangulation (Anney, 2014). Member checking was used to enhance the credibility of the findings (see Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005) by asking participants to check summaries of the interview content. Confirmability of findings entailed the use of analytic memos and a reflexivity journal to ensure objectivity in any interpretations made in the course of data analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Analytic memos were written throughout data analysis to record thoughts about the meaning behind participants' words (Saldaña, 2009). A reflexivity journal was employed to assist the PI with preparing to interview each participant and enter their subjective reality by writing about her own defining moment experiences as a counselor prior to interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012). Moreover, the PI maintained the reflexivity journal throughout the interviews and data analysis processes. The PI made a consistent effort to bracket assumptions

and biases to not superimpose her own experiences or subjective interpretations as a professional counselor (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The transferability of research findings was met by purposive sampling of participants based on their capacity to provide relevant knowledge on defining moment experiences (Anney, 2014). The criteria of ensuring dependability was met by employing the Dedoose qualitative research software program (Moylan, Derr, & Lindhorst, 2015) to independently organize, archive, and code interview data and field notes, as well as validate codes and themes derived from interview data (Silver & Lewins, 2014). The dependability of the data was enhanced by having the external auditor confirm the accuracy of (1) interview transcripts, (2) descriptive field notes, (3) the reflexive journal, (4) the theme codebook, and (5) Dedoose summaries and output.

Table 2

Interview Questions for the Study

Question No.	Question content
1	Tell me about a defining moment that occurred while working with a client(s). This moment could have occurred in the early stages of counselor training or at a later time in your work as a counselor.
1a	• What made it a defining moment?
1b	• Do you have a takeaway from this moment?
1c	• Is there anything else you would like to share about this experience?
2	How did this experience shape how you saw yourself as a professional counselor? As a person?
2a	• What did this experience mean to you as a counselor?
2b	• What did this experience mean to you on a personal level?
2c	• What assisted you with making sense out of this experience?
3	How did this experience shape your sense of clinical competency?
3a	• What strengths did you become aware of?
3b	• What weaknesses or limitations did you become aware of?
4	How did you regard the therapeutic relationship between client and counselor prior to your defining moment experience?
4a	• How did your understanding of the therapeutic relationship change or not change after the defining moment experience?
4b	• How would you describe the therapeutic relationship between client and counselor as if you were describing this to a layperson/non-clinician?
5	As you reflect on your defining moment experience, how has your perspective changed or not changed?
5a	• How did you make sense of the experience then?
5b	• How do you make sense of the experience now?

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a 3-stage process as outlined by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012): *immersion*, *transformation*, and *connection*. The immersion process began with the PI listening to each interview after its conclusion in order to review the content and record any additional observations in the field notes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each interview was transcribed by an independent contractor and the PI reviewed each along with the digital recording to ensure accuracy and facilitate deeper immersion in the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The PI read the participant's responses along with the recording during the review process to foster deeper immersion and understanding of the experience being shared (Bailey, 2008). The PI documented new observations and insights throughout the immersion process in field notes and via a reflexivity journal (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The RA also independently engaged in the immersion, transformation, and connection stages with the interview transcripts.

The PI and the RA worked together to review and interpret all their notes about the transcripts and transform them into emergent themes consistent with IPA methodology (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Emergent themes were then connected together according to conceptual similarities to develop a thematic hierarchy (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The final stage of analysis entailed a narrative account of each theme, including direct passages from the interviews. The PI and the RA also discussed and compared several levels of interpretation of interview content and of interpreted meanings to reach agreement on the final set of distinct themes. Moreover, the transcripts, notes, and themes were submitted to the external auditor, who conducted an independent cross-analysis to ensure their accuracy and clarity.

Results

Data analysis with IPA methods resulted in five themes being identified and labeled based on the meanings associated with professional counselors' defining moment experiences (see Table 3). The first theme was labeled *acceptance of reality* and captures how defining moment experiences led professional counselors to the realization that counselors are not always a good match for a client and cannot fully resolve any clinical problem that comes their way. The second theme, *finding a balance*, addresses how defining moment experiences shaped perceptions of clinical boundaries and the balance between strengths and limitations and external and internal forces. The third theme to be derived from the analysis, *enhanced self-reflection and awareness*, captures professional counselors' understanding that defining moment experiences facilitated their own reflection and questioning of their intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. The fourth theme, *reciprocal transformation*, illustrates how the experiences shaped professional counselors' understanding of the therapeutic relationship and acted as a mutual change agent for both counselor and client. Lastly, the fifth theme, *assimilation and integration*, encapsulates how meanings attached to defining moment experiences changed and were incorporated over time.

Table 3

IPA Coding Scheme of the Meaning of Defining Moment Experiences of Professional Counselors

Theme	Description
1. Acceptance of reality	Coming to terms with the realistic, sometimes limiting, aspects of the counselor role
2. Finding a balance	Perceptions of clinical boundaries and the balance between strengths and limitations and external and internal forces
3. Enhanced self-reflection and awareness	Facilitated reflection and questioning of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes
4. Reciprocal transformation	Mutual change agent for both counselor and client
5. Assimilation and integration	How meanings attached to defining moment experiences changed and were incorporated over time

Theme 1: Acceptance of Reality

Experienced counselors made meaning of their defining moment experiences in the theme of *acceptance of reality*. This theme was derived to reflect participants' thoughts about how their defining moment experience helped them come to terms with the realistic, sometimes limiting, aspects of the counselor role. Specifically, defining moment experiences were understood by counselors to help dispel the myth that counselors are a good match for any client and can "fix" and fully resolve any clinical problem that comes their way. According to Ellen, "some situations are beyond repair. If people wait too long to come to see us, we can't help, and they can't even make any changes for themselves." For Jackie, the defining moment experience meant being comfortable with accepting the reality of the limiting aspects of the counselor role when a client didn't want to change and wanted Jackie to do all the work. She reflected: "In that moment, I just remembered saying . . . you can't help everybody. It just means I'm not a good fit (for everybody) and that's okay." Similarly, the defining moment experience of Alaina meant accepting the reality that "a client I cannot love is not right for me . . . I don't agree celebrating [the fact of] working with someone you don't have a connection with." It also would appear from these defining moment reflections that the acceptance of reality was associated with deeper knowledge of counselor–client boundary conditions. Indeed, counselor–client boundary issues were a significant factor in the defining moments theme of *finding a balance*.

Theme 2: Finding a Balance

The theme of *finding a balance* was identified in participants' understanding of their defining moment experiences as highlighting different therapeutic boundary conditions and balancing the fine line between internal or external limitations while gaining a sense of finesse and agility between opposing forces. Here, participants identified a dual connection between strengths and limitations, while expressing accountability for establishing a balance between the two factors for client benefit. By taking ownership of a specific personality trait as part of the defining moment experience, Lee came to understand the importance of balance and the potential for possible pitfalls if such a balance is not obtained: "It was my personal disposition to speak with conviction, which is both a strength and limitation. I am still this way of course, but I know when to scale it back—to strike that balance."

Finding a balance through defining moment experiences was evident in participants sharing their experiences of entering uncharted or unfamiliar territories with some trepidation, only to find their own rhythm through setting boundaries. Alaina shared: “I understood I was really flying by the seat of my pants and the only thing I had that I really understood were my boundaries. It made my boundaries even stronger. They were very heart-wrenching limitations; it was very hard.” Moreover, Ellen conveyed how the defining moment experience highlighted the process of balancing between her own feelings of physical vulnerability and her inner strengths when she was working with a couple in an abusive relationship: “I needed to sit alone with him to keep her safe. It was like walking into the lion’s den; however, my use of self-intuition [and] wisdom was a strength. I was just going to tap dance with him when I saw him.”

Theme 3: Enhanced Self-Reflection and Awareness

Professional counselors understood their defining moment experiences as ones that especially facilitated self-reflection and awareness of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. At the intrapersonal level, John highlighted how the defining moment experience “increased my awareness and clarity of my own internal processes.” At the interpersonal level, Lee shared: “I made a connection in my personal relationships where I’ve learned to create space for others.” The theme of self-reflection also was manifest in the level of self-questioning prompted by the defining moment experiences of professional counselors. Indeed, Jackie discussed how her defining moment experience led to “a lot of reflection; I started to question my passion and why I wanted to be a therapist.” Similarly, Gina reflected that “I was puzzled and confused; lots of self-doubt [and] reflection. I remember where I would question whether I was a good therapist.” Importantly, the self-reflection and awareness prompted by the defining moment experiences of professional counselors appeared to have confirmed their professional capacities, with Gretchen sharing: “I received affirmation of what I thought I knew — what my gut was telling me.”

Theme 4: Reciprocal Transformation

Professional counselors understood their defining moment experiences as entailing the theme of *reciprocal transformation* through shared vulnerability and trust. This theme was derived from counselors speaking to their awareness of the dynamic of change within the therapeutic relationship; defining moment experiences generated a broader understanding of the transformative power within the therapeutic bond. For example, Lee shared: “You know, it’s a two-way conversation. This guy came back, taught me a great lesson: just how sacred and fragile the bond can be. I think we both changed after that experience.” Reciprocal transformation was reflected in participants discussing how defining moment experiences were associated with shared feelings of vulnerability and healing. As stated by Ellen, “We work with vulnerable people and if we just pretend we’re not there’s no authentic connection. The relationship is the primary vehicle for healing. Vulnerability is a good thing as a therapist.”

Jackie discussed how her defining moment experience highlighted the importance of disclosure in transforming the therapeutic relationship into one of mutual trust: “You are both engaging in some sense of disclosure and that helps people to build trust. It’s ever-growing, it’s always changing. The relationship can change and grow as the two of you grow and change.” In a similar way, Jon’s understanding of his defining moment experience highlighted the importance of taking risks to transform the therapeutic relationship: “You are risking the possibility that something will happen so then emotionally they won’t go on with you. You need to be willing to clear the air and move forward. I think that’s the place where the relationship deepens.”

Theme 5: Assimilation and Integration

The final theme, *assimilation and integration*, represents the difference in meaning between how the defining moment experience was initially assimilated by professional counselors and how meanings gleaned from the experience continue to be integrated. Participants discussed the non-static nature of the meanings attached to their defining moment experiences. The meanings continue to be assimilated with time and experience and remain an integral part of their ongoing counselor development. For example, Jackie stated: "I needed to grow as a therapist. Now, I look at the experience differently. It really has evolved into knowing my limitations [and] my strengths." For Alaina, "the meanings acquired more textures, they got better and continue with me today." Similarly, Lee used the metaphor of winding a ball of yarn to explain the meaning associated with integrating her defining moment experience over time: "Then, it taught me more about the client. Now, it informs me more. It's like a ball of yarn. As I acquired experience, there was more yarn to wind. It now informs me how to be with all clients."

For John, processing the defining moment experience meant he went from a place of anxiety to becoming aware of the spiritual nature of counseling: "At first, the experience relieved some anxiety about whether I was able to do this work. What I appreciate now, that I was too anxious to be aware of at the time, is that this is spiritual work." Finally, Ace integrated her defining experience of working with a victim of teenage sexual abuse by now conducting advocacy work: "What assisted me with making sense out of my experience was volunteering for child abuse agencies, serving on a board, [and] being an advocate." Overall, each participant constructed meaningful interpretations of their defining moment experiences that continue to inform their work and passion as counseling professionals, whether as a source of inspiration or affirmation.

Discussion

From novice to seasoned professionals, challenges occur within the therapeutic relationship that can provide growth opportunities to counseling practitioners to develop their clinical attributes (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). The findings from this study support and extend the idea that defining moment experiences represent one such challenge. Professional counselors in this study understood their defining moment experiences as growth opportunities associated with different meanings to their professional practice and clinical skills. The meanings of the defining moment experiences of professional counselors were interpreted to reflect five main themes relevant to counseling practice: acceptance of reality, finding a balance, enhanced self-reflection and awareness, reciprocal transformation, and assimilation and integration.

Professional counselors understood their defining moment experience as one that was a wake-up call to accept the reality that counselors are not ideal for all clients and all presenting problems. This finding supports theory and research that an idealistic and glamorized view of counseling is often a source of stress among developing counselors (Moss et al., 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003), wherein supervisors play an important role in guiding novice counselors toward the realistic position that it is not always possible to have a positive impact with clients. Indeed, the findings of this study provide distinct evidence that defining moment experiences of professional counselors bring them to a point in their career when they come to accept that the counselor role may produce limited success with certain clients on different occasions. As suggested by Skovholt and Rønnestad (2003) and the findings of this study, acceptance of reality is paradoxical in a helping profession like counseling; growth as a counselor occurs with the realization that some people and problems cannot be helped. This change of view also

meant that the acceptance of reality was associated with deeper knowledge of counselor–client boundary conditions.

The meanings of professional counselors' defining moment experiences were reflected in the specific theme of finding a balance in terms of participants navigating the boundaries between their strengths and limitations. Previous counselor development research (e.g., Furr & Carroll, 2003; Moss et al., 2014; Trotter-Mathison et al., 2010) has shown that establishing client–counselor boundaries is an important challenge to novice counselors, usually meant in terms of establishing emotional boundaries. To the counselors in this study, establishing such boundaries was about finding the right balance. Nevertheless, the meanings associated with the defining moment experiences of professional counselors extended beyond client–counselor boundaries to include balance between one's own strengths and weaknesses, internal and external limitations, and finding a rhythm in uncharted or unfamiliar territories. It also was apparent that the participants' ability for self-reflection and awareness was important for facilitating balance.

Experienced counselors also understood their defining moment experiences to entail enhanced self-reflection and awareness. Indeed, their willingness to self-reflect and take ownership for finding an optimal balance between strengths and limitations that were revealed through defining moment experiences has been clarified elsewhere as an important developmental step toward increased counseling competency (e.g., Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003; Thériault & Gazzola, 2010; Williams, Hayes, & Fauth, 2008). As identified by Moss et al. (2014), continuous reflection is required for optimal learning. Defining moment experiences for professional counselors meant self-reflection even to the point of questioning their suitability for the profession. Indeed, the best counselors are generally viewed as questioning what they do and why (Kottler, 2017). It would appear from the findings that defining moment experiences appear to bring that level of self-questioning into focus.

The findings also revealed the change-agent quality of defining moment experiences wherein the experiences of counselors led to the development of a broader understanding of the reciprocal and transformative power within the therapeutic bond. In line with previous research (e.g., Orlinsky, Botermans, & Rønnestad, 2001; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003), the findings clarified that learning within the counselor–client relationship was a significant influence on career development among experienced counselors. Moreover, reciprocal transformation was reflected in professional counselors acknowledging shared vulnerability within the counselor–client relationship. Other research (e.g., Trotter-Mathison et al., 2010) has similarly found the most powerful defining moments occurred when counselors took risks or a leap of faith and allowed themselves to be vulnerable. Indeed, the defining moment experiences of the professional counselors in this study were reported as opportunities to experience the transformative power of shared vulnerability to establish new learning and growth in both counselor and client alike.

Within the theme of assimilation and integration, professional counselors shared how meanings of their defining moments continue to be a solid foundation of inspiration for their purpose, passion, and advocacy work in the counseling profession. Siegel (2007) referred to this process as the power of recall and repetition, whereby as counselors self-reflect on definitive experiences, the repetition of each memory forges deeper, more meaningful connections in the brain. Whether counselors engage in self-reflection in present time or as retrospection, the repetition of recall begins to move newly acquired data from state to trait, thus furthering the integration of new information or insights (Siegel, 2007). This view is supported in Prengel and Somerstein's (2013) study of defining moment experiences, which highlights the process of self-reflection as one that requires time and re-examination in order

to deepen lessons learned. In kind, the findings of this study suggest it is beneficial for counselors to engage in self-reflective practices throughout their professional life; the practice of self-reflection appears to have facilitated deeper integration of originally assimilated meanings of defining moment experiences by professional counselors. Consistent with the view of Engels, Barrio Minton, and Ray (2009), assimilation and integration of significant meanings appeared to have a positive effect on the competencies of professional counselors in this study.

Altogether, interpretive analysis of the defining moment experiences of professional counselors suggested a set of interrelated meanings and themes that appear to facilitate the development of counselor capacities. Defining moment experiences appear to bring into sharp focus an important transition in counselor thinking—acceptance of the realistic nature of counseling in terms of the sometimes lack of counselor–client–problem fit. In a related way, defining moment experiences of professional counselors facilitated deeper thinking about finding balance in professional practice. Professional counselors reported deeper thinking in the form of heightened self-reflection and self-awareness as meanings they associated with defining moment experiences. One may posit that heightened self-reflection and awareness mediates the relationship between defining moment experiences and acceptance of reality and finding balance in professional counseling. Defining moment experiences of professional counselors also held significant meaning because they highlighted the reciprocal and transformative power within the therapeutic bond and because the meanings continue to be integrated. As shared by Jackie, “This was a great opportunity to reflect on where I was and who I’ve become . . . all with the same lesson from my first client . . . that thread continues to inform me.”

Implications for Counselor Practice

The significance of defining moment experiences to professional counselors raises implications for professional practice and the counselor development process. As suggested by themes identified in the findings of this study, experienced professional counselors appeared to find defining moment experiences helped them accept counseling realities, find balance within the counselor role, and understand the transformative power within the therapeutic bond. At the same time, defining moment experiences facilitated heightened self-awareness, providing professional counselors an opportunity to attune to their own internal processes. As such, the meanings associated with defining moment experiences tie in with standards set forth by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2015), which aligns professional competence with counselor self-awareness via self-reflection. Facilitating conversations and reflecting on defining moment experiences may provide a focal point for continuing training of professional counselors consistent with the mission of ACA (2019). The findings of this study underline the potential benefits of practicing and modeling self-reflection throughout the careers of professional counselors, supervisors, and counselor mentors to enhance their ongoing development and clinical expertise.

At the same time, counselor training programs may incorporate the meanings of defining moment experiences into their courses. Indeed, some participants in this study reported on a defining moment experience that occurred as a counselor trainee, and previous research has revealed practicum and novice counselors find great benefit from reflecting on defining experiences when they worked with a challenging client or issue (e.g., Bischoff et al., 2002; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Howard et al., 2006). Providers of counselor education programs and supervisors could develop awareness of the potential for defining moment experiences to raise questions about the realities of counseling, finding a balance in the counselor role, and the transformative power of the therapeutic relationship. This may be facilitated by encouraging novice counselors to employ self-reflection techniques such as journaling, which has been shown in

previous research to benefit counselor development (e.g., Burnett & Meacham, 2002). Novice counselors could be asked to self-reflect on a defining moment experience via journaling as a part of their practicum and internship programs and use supervision sessions to connect the meaning and significance of the experience to the development of clinical skills and attributes. The findings of this study provide some insights on what type of meanings may be discussed in such sessions, including how defining moment experiences may relate to acceptance of counseling realities, finding a balance within the counselor role, and understanding the transformative power within the therapeutic bond.

Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations inherent in this study that require acknowledgement. The sample of participants might have invoked a self-selection bias wherein participants who elected to take part in the study may have been more inclined to value and reflect on their defining moment experiences than those who did not elect to participate. The use of semi-structured interviews, whether conducted in person or by phone, could have increased the likelihood of response inhibition (Bischoff et al., 2002). The interview participants could have answered interview questions according to perceived socially desirable responses rather than provide a more accurate and honest account of thoughts and feelings associated with their defining moment experiences. Steps to ensure confidentiality, such as the use of pseudonyms for participants, may have minimized response bias; however, to what degree is uncertain. In addition, the sample of participants was limited to professional counselors who worked in private practice with an expertise in trauma. A final limitation of the study is the potential for researcher subjectivity to influence data collection (interviews) and interpretive analysis (thematic coding). Nevertheless, appropriate methodological steps were taken in this study, such as a reflexivity journal and independent coders, to enhance the objectivity and trustworthiness of the data collection and interpretation procedures and outcomes.

The research findings provide directions for future research on defining moment experiences of professional counselors. To date, there is very little empirical research on defining moment experiences and their significance to professional counselors. Whereas this study provides a unique contribution to the counselor literature, future research may broaden the sample criteria to include not only experienced professionals in other regions of the United States and in other countries, but also licensed clinical social workers, licensed marriage and family therapists, and clinical psychologists. Research with a range of professionals would broaden knowledge about the significance of defining moment experiences to their ongoing professional practice. Moreover, research that broadens the focus on counselors to include an investigation of the role of supervisors in defining moment experiences would be worthwhile. Finally, research may follow up on the revelation from two participants in this study that defining moment experiences led them to question their suitability for the counseling profession. Research on the defining moment experiences of individuals who chose to leave the field may shed light upon the goodness-of-counselor-fit within the counseling profession.

Conclusion

In conclusion, findings from this study support and contribute to the professional counseling literature by revealing the meanings associated with the defining moment experiences of professional counselors. Consistent with models of counselor development (e.g., Moss et al., 2014), experienced counselors showed a comparatively strong capacity to deeply reflect and process the latent meanings and implications of defining moment experiences for their ongoing professional growth and development. Defining moment experiences appear to help professional counselors accept the realities of counseling, find a balance within the counselor role, and understand the transformative

power within the therapeutic bond. The findings contribute to existing literature by illustrating how meaningful interpretations of defining moment experiences continue to deepen over time and enhance counselor practice, especially when opportunities are taken for self-reflection. Application of knowledge on the significance, meaning, and implications of defining moment experiences in counselor training programs and supervision sessions provides an opportunity for enhancing the clinical attributes of professional counselors.

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Comparison of School Characteristics Among RAMP and Non-RAMP Schools



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The Recognized American School Counselor Association Model Program (RAMP) designation aims to acknowledge school counselors who deliver comprehensive data-driven programs. However, there is little research to date that examines RAMP schools and associated factors with this designation. Therefore, we compared the characteristics of schools that earned the RAMP designation with a random sample of schools without this designation to examine if differences exist. Data was accessed using the Elementary/Secondary Information System through the U.S. Department of Education. The results indicated that non-RAMP schools in this study were more likely to: (a) be eligible for Title I; (b) be located in city, rural, and township communities; and (c) have fewer students and full-time equivalent employees. Furthermore, non-RAMP schools had higher rates of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. The development of support mechanisms for the RAMP-seeking process for these schools may be beneficial along with further research on this topic.

Keywords: Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP), school counseling, school characteristics, U.S. Department of Education, data-driven

School counselors provide an array of services to students and families across elementary and secondary schools. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) created the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012), a framework for school counselors to identify the appropriate roles and duties of a school counselor. Additionally, the ASCA National Model outlines the tenets of comprehensive school counseling programs. Currently, the ASCA National Model is the only structured framework promoted by ASCA that recommends job duties and different roles that will help to support the school community (ASCA, 2012). For example, ASCA recommends that school counselors spend 80% or more of their time in providing direct or indirect service with the students in their buildings and 20% or less in program planning or school support (ASCA, 2012). Thus, this model is taught in school counselor training programs and used for professional development of practicing school counselors across the United States. One initiative by ASCA to encourage and recognize rigorously implemented school counseling programs is to facilitate the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation program (ASCA, 2019). RAMP is earned by school counseling programs that consistently adhere to the ASCA National Model and demonstrate its implementation and outcomes through data-driven practices. Programs with the RAMP designation are highlighted at ASCA-related events and publications. The RAMP initiative has encouraged many school counseling programs to implement comprehensive services and requires evaluation of their effectiveness through data-driven practices.

While the RAMP recognition intends to highlight accomplished school counseling programs, the general development of the ASCA National Model helped to structure the efforts and experiences of school counselors and students. Researchers have previously asserted that the ASCA National Model can benefit student achievement and promote effective school counseling programs (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Carey, Harritty, & Dimmitt, 2005; Sink & Stroh, 2003). In a study of secondary school counselors from Michigan, Pyne (2011) suggested that school counselors who implemented a comprehensive school counseling program, like the ASCA National Model, experienced greater job

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satisfaction compared to school counselors without such programs. Specifically, school counselors exhibited greater job satisfaction when school counseling programs had administrative support, included communication among school faculty members, possessed a clear program philosophy, identified clear roles of the school counselor, served all students in the school, and included time for planning and evaluation of the school counseling program and related activities (Pyne, 2011).

In studies of state-based school counseling programs, researchers have found positive features of student outcomes in schools with comprehensive school counseling programs. Carey, Harrington, Martin, and Hoffman (2012) assessed school counseling programs in suburban and rural Nebraska high schools, and found that well-implemented and differentiated programs with features of the ASCA National Model enhanced student outcomes, including lower suspension rates, lower discipline incident rates, higher attendance rates, and higher math proficiency. By contrast, high school counselors in Nebraska who spent more time providing responsive services were associated with schools with higher suspension and disciplinary incident rates and lower graduation rates. Moreover, Carey, Harrington, Martin, and Stevenson (2012) assessed school counseling programs in Utah high schools, and found that high schools that reflected components of the ASCA National Model improved student achievement, such as ACT scores, number of students taking the ACT, and percentage of students with proficient reading and math scores on the state assessments. The researchers suggested that programmatic focus and use of data were strongly associated with academic achievement and college aspirations in Utah high schools (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012). Carey, Harrington, Martin, and Stevenson (2012) also found that more favorable or lower student-to-school counselor ratios were connected to decreased disciplinary issues and increased student attendance.

Lapan, Gysbers, and Petroski (2001) found that students who attended Missouri middle schools with fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs reported feeling safer and having fewer conflicts with peers, having improved relationships with teachers, and believing their education was applicable to their future, as compared to students who attended schools with lower implementation fidelity. Additionally, Sink, Akos, Turnbull, and Mvududu (2008) compared student achievement in middle schools in Washington with and without fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs and found student achievement was significantly higher in schools with fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs for at least five years. Both studies indicated positive student outcomes associated with the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs. However, despite a call for schools and school counselors to implement comprehensive school counseling programs for more than 30 years, Martin, Carey, and DeCoster (2009) found that 17 states have fully implemented these programs and 24 states have at least partially implemented these programs.

Although previous research addressed how components of the ASCA National Model offer benefits to school counseling programs and schools, there is little known about how schools that earn a RAMP designation uniquely aid students' academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary outcomes. In other words, there is limited research about the differences between schools with a RAMP designation versus schools without a RAMP designation (henceforward *non-RAMP*). In one study, Wilkerson, Pérusse, and Hughes (2013) compared RAMP and non-RAMP designated schools on their Adequate Yearly Progress scores for Math and English/Language Arts and found that the elementary schools with RAMP performed better than non-RAMP schools. However, the researchers only collected data from a single state, had a limited sample size resulting in issues related to power, and did not control for school factors (e.g., funding, size, and student characteristics) that may have impacted the results. Outside of this single study, no other research has been done that provides empirical evidence for RAMP designated schools being more effective at addressing students' educational outcomes over non-RAMP schools.

Other studies about RAMP schools connected the benefits of data-driven decision making, supervisory practices, and administrative support. In a study of school counselors from RAMP schools, Young and Kaffenberger (2011) found that participants who earned RAMP actively used data to drive and inform school counseling program development and impact student outcomes. In addition, school counselors reported that undergoing the RAMP application process transformed their beliefs in using data to address gaps and develop interventions (Young & Kaffenberger, 2011). In addition, Blakely, Underwood, and Rehfuss (2009) found that supervisors in a RAMP school provided significantly more supervisory activities related to the ASCA National Model for school counseling trainees in RAMP schools than trainees in traditional schools (i.e., non-RAMP schools), which may help to maintain consistency in school counseling training and support trainees to apply their university training in their professional practice. Moreover, in a study of administrators' perceptions of school counselors in RAMP versus non-RAMP schools, Dodson (2009) found that participants from RAMP schools more often perceived school counselors to deliver classroom guidance lessons, counsel students with disciplinary concerns, consult with teachers, and interpret student records, compared to participants from non-RAMP schools. According to these studies, there are benefits of understanding the RAMP process in schools to inform training practices and elicit administrative support.

One topic related to becoming a RAMP-designated school is the ability of a counseling program to implement the components of the ASCA National Model with fidelity. To implement a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors need the financial and time resources to implement the services. For example, the school or school counselor may need to put forth money to purchase various curricula for group or classroom interventions. Moreover, ASCA suggests that the recommended timeline of the RAMP process includes one to two years of planning (e.g., developing the foundational and management components, such as calendars, an advisory council, and advisory agreement) and approximately one year to collect and evaluate data (ASCA, 2019). A minimum 2-year commitment can be burdensome for school counseling programs with a single school counselor and even for a team of school counselors, which may require coordination. In addition, school counselors often have high student caseloads and do not always have the time to implement the various components of the ASCA National Model because they focus on responding to immediate student needs and non-counselor-related duties (McCarthy, van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzmán, 2010). Increased financial resources and counselors in a school (i.e., lower student-to-counselor ratio) impact the ability of school counselors to implement the ASCA National Model (Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012). As a result, schools with fewer staff allocations and fewer financial supports may be less likely to put forth time and resources to the RAMP designation.

In addition, the application for RAMP costs \$250 for ASCA members and \$500 for non-members, which adds to the financial burden of schools to pay to implement these services. There also is a perceived lack of benefit for earning RAMP designation. School districts and states have yet to incentivize the RAMP designation, making the use of time and financial effort toward this status resultant in only professional recognition (ASCA, 2019). Given the emphasis placed on the ASCA National Model and the RAMP designation, those schools with the fewest resources may likely have the least amount of opportunity to implement. However, there has been no research on the differences in school characteristics for those sites that have earned the RAMP designation in comparison to those schools who have not earned this recognition. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the characteristics of RAMP-designated schools to a sample of non-RAMP schools to provide information about how these schools differ.

While earning the RAMP designation is an indicator of the comprehensive implementation of the ASCA National Model, little is known about characteristics of schools that have attained RAMP recognition in comparison to non-RAMP schools. The lack of research on RAMP schools is notable due to ASCA's efforts to train and encourage practitioners to earn this recognition, which may take school counselors away from other responsibilities or burden them with more commitments. It is likely that school counseling programs that pursue RAMP have unique qualities as compared to non-RAMP schools, given the requirements of RAMP, which necessitate resources and organizational support. Some differences between RAMP and non-RAMP schools might lie in the school counselors' individual qualities (e.g., professional identity, training, motivation); however, there could be characteristics of the school that differ (e.g., school size or location) and facilitate or hinder the achievement of RAMP designation. Therefore, we compared differences in school characteristics based on whether a school has achieved RAMP status. The following exploratory research questions guided our study: (1) Do schools whose school counseling programs have achieved RAMP differ in general school characteristics when compared to schools with school counseling programs that have not achieved RAMP status? (2) Do schools whose school counseling programs have achieved RAMP differ in student body characteristics when compared to schools with school counseling programs that have not achieved RAMP status?

Method

Data Sources

The analyses in this study utilized school-level data publicly available from the Common Core of Data's (CCD) Elementary/Secondary Information System (ELSi; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) to retrieve the school characteristics for a sample of RAMP schools and non-RAMP schools. The CCD is a census database that provides information on all public elementary and secondary schools along with school districts and additional administrative and operational entities in the United States. Education agencies submit data to the National Center for Education Statistics on an annual basis (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In the data set, three types of information are collected: (a) general descriptive data (e.g., school grade level and locale), (b) demographic data on staff and students, and (c) fiscal data.

We accessed the ELSi to retrieve information on general descriptive data and demographic data. In our first step, we downloaded a dataset of every U.S. public school from the most recent year available (2015–2016) that contained characteristics for each school. We captured information about free and reduced lunch rates (i.e., based on family size and income criteria, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches at school under the National School Lunch Act), Title I status (i.e., per state and federal regulations, Title I schools are eligible for participation in programs authorized by Title I of Public Law 103-382), geographic region in which the school is located, grade level, number of students at the school, race and ethnicity demographics for each school, and school full-time–equivalent (FTE) teachers. Then, we removed schools ($n = 133$) that attained RAMP status in 2015 or 2016 and created a new dataset with these schools. We selected the RAMP schools from the 2015–2016 school year to match the years in which the CCD was represented. The list of RAMP schools was acquired through the ASCA website. After removing RAMP schools, we generated an equal-sized simple random sample of schools ($n = 133$) from the remaining schools in the CCD database. The resulting aggregated and de-identified sample included data for 266 schools across the United States. There were some cases in which data was missing (e.g., three schools didn't report grade level served).

Participants

The sample ($N = 266$) in this study included RAMP ($n = 133$, 50%) and non-RAMP ($n = 133$, 50%) schools from across the United States. On average, the schools in this sample reported 940.96 ($SD = 753.76$, $Mdn = 706.00$, Range = 35 to 4,190) students, a mean teacher-to-pupil ratio of 16.80 ($SD = 4.72$, $Mdn = 16.18$, Range = 8.57 to 53.56), and a mean FTE of 55.43 ($SD = 42.69$, $Mdn = 43.60$, Range = 0 to 270.96). In addition, the average percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch was 48.33% ($SD = 26.81$, $Mdn = 46.30$, Range = 2.32 to 100), and the majority of schools were eligible for Title I funding ($n = 159$, 59.8%) as compared to not being eligible for Title I funding ($n = 107$, 40.2%). We used percentages of the student body that make up each race and ethnicity group by dividing the number of students for each group by the total number of students in the school and multiplying it by 100. Across all the schools that reported the race and ethnicity rates in this study ($N = 261$), White students had the highest mean percentage ($M = 52.30\%$, $Mdn = 55.38\%$, $SD = 29.26\%$) followed by Hispanic ($M = 19.94\%$, $Mdn = 12.44\%$, $SD = 21.82\%$), Black ($M = 17.47\%$, $Mdn = 8.28\%$, $SD = 22.20\%$), Asian ($M = 4.93\%$, $Mdn = 2.04\%$, $SD = 7.54\%$), Two or more races/ethnicities ($M = 3.99\%$, $Mdn = 3.33\%$, $SD = 3.13\%$), Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ($M = .74\%$, $Mdn = .05\%$, $SD = 5.81\%$), and American Indian ($M = .69\%$, $Mdn = .22\%$, $SD = 2.78\%$).

Regarding location, the ELSi portal identifies locales, which measure schools' locations relative to the populated areas in which they are situated, as city, suburban, town, and rural settings. There are 12 subdomains to indicate varied levels within the broad domains: City: Large, Midsize, and Small; Suburb: Large, Midsize, and Small; Town: Fringe, Distant, and Remote; and Rural: Fringe, Distant, and Remote (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). For this study, we condensed these subcategories into four broad areas to simplify the analyses. Most schools were located in suburban communities ($n = 120$, 45.1%) followed by city ($n = 71$, 26.7%), rural ($n = 53$, 19.9%), and town ($n = 22$, 8.3%). The majority of the schools were primary level ($n = 111$, 41.7%) followed by secondary level ($n = 79$, 29.7%), middle ($n = 65$, 24.4%), and other levels ($n = 8$, 3.0%), with three (1.1%) cases of missing data.

ELSi denotes two school-choice programs: (a) charter schools—schools that offer elementary and secondary education for students who are eligible under a charter approved by the state legislature or some other applicable authority and (b) magnet schools—schools that offer programs to draw students of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds with the aim to decrease racial isolation and offer an academic and social focus. Two-hundred and forty-three (91.4%) of the schools were not charter schools, 11 (4.1%) schools identified as charter schools, and 12 schools did not have data for this category. Only 29 (10.9%) schools in the sample identified as magnet schools, 222 (83.5%) schools were not magnet schools, and 15 (5.6%) schools had missing data.

Study Variables

The two-level independent variable in this study was whether a school achieved RAMP status. The dependent variables included general descriptive data and demographic data on students. The general descriptive dependent variables of school characteristics (Research Question 1) included grade level served by the school (i.e., elementary, middle, high school), geographic location of the school (i.e., city, suburban, town, and rural), FTE, and total number of attending students. Furthermore, the student demographic data dependent variables (Research Question 2) included percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, Title I status of the school, and percentage of race and ethnicity in the student body. For percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch and percentage of race/ethnicity in the student body, we calculated these variables using the frequency count data. All dependent variables were selected by using the filter option in ELSi.

Data Analysis

We employed the Mann-Whitney U Test and chi-square analyses for this study due to the data characteristics. Specifically, each analysis included RAMP status as a nominal and dichotomous independent variable. The dependent variables were nominal with four groups or continuous data. However, the distribution of the continuous dependent variables violated assumptions for normality; thus, we applied non-parametric approaches of data analysis to this data. The Mann-Whitney U Test was used with continuous dependent variables. For the Mann-Whitney U Tests, we interpreted the effect sizes by computing the approximate value of r (Pallant, 2011), which could be interpreted using 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5 for small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Cohen, 1988). We also utilized chi-square tests for independence when the dependent variables were nominal. In the case of a two-by-two chi-square table, we used Yates' continuity correction statistics for interpretation and the phi coefficient to evaluate the effect size. The phi coefficient can be interpreted in a similar fashion as the r statistic. For analyses with chi-square tables of two-by-four, we studied the Pearson chi-square statistic and the Cramer's V effect size statistic. We interpreted the Cramer's V based on criteria for four categories (0.06, 0.17, and 0.29 were small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively; Pallant, 2011). An initial a priori power analysis for the Mann-Whitney U Test using G*Power with an alpha level of .05, power established at .95, and a moderate effect size of 0.5 (Cohen, 1988) identified a minimum sample size of 184. Similarly, we conducted an a priori power analysis for the chi-square tests for independence using G*Power with an alpha level of .05, power established at .95, and a moderate effect size of 0.3 (Cohen, 1988) and identified a minimum sample of 191. We used a Bonferroni corrected value of .003 as a means to reduce the likelihood of Type I errors.

Results

General School Characteristics

Our first research question examined whether schools whose school counseling programs have achieved RAMP (i.e., RAMP schools) differ in general school characteristics when compared to schools with school counseling programs that have not achieved RAMP status (i.e., non-RAMP schools). We facilitated a Mann-Whitney U Test to compare the total number of students per school for both RAMP and non-RAMP schools. The Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistically significant difference in RAMP schools ($M_{rank} = 159.90$, $Mdn = 925$, $M = 1,201.81$, $SD = 853.67$) versus non-RAMP schools ($M_{rank} = 103.96$, $Mdn = 575$, $M = 687.96$, $SD = 534.56$, $U = 4,915.50$, $z = -5.97$, $p < .001$, $r = .37$). Similarly, we completed the Mann-Whitney U Test to analyze FTEs for both RAMP and non-RAMP schools. The Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistically significant difference in FTE for schools that had RAMP ($M_{rank} = 159.20$, $Mdn = 51.37$, $M = 69.38$, $SD = 48.49$) and those schools that did not have RAMP ($M_{rank} = 105.80$, $Mdn = 32.48$, $M = 41.49$, $SD = 30.27$, $U = 5,187.00$, $z = -5.68$, $p < .001$, $r = .35$).

A chi-square test for independence indicated a statistically significant association between RAMP and geographic location among the schools in this study: $\chi^2 (3, N = 266) = 22.94$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .29$. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the frequency and percentage for each geographical location by RAMP status. Non-RAMP schools were more often located in city, town, and rural settings than RAMP schools, whereas RAMP schools were more often located in suburban locations. A chi-square test for independence indicated no statistically significant association between RAMP and school level among the schools in this study: $\chi^2 (3, N = 263) = 22.94$, $p = .06$, Cramer's $V = .17$ (Bonferroni corrected p value of .003).

Table 1

Chi-square Tests of Independence Comparing RAMP Versus Non-RAMP Schools

Independent Variable	RAMP (<i>n</i> = 133)	Non-RAMP (<i>n</i> = 133)	Pearson χ^2	Cramer's <i>V</i>
Geographic Location			22.94**	.29
City (<i>n</i> = 71)	28 (39.4%)	43 (60.6%)		
Suburban (<i>n</i> = 120)	79 (65.8%)	41 (34.3%)		
Town (<i>n</i> = 22)	6 (27.3%)	16 (72.7%)		
Rural (<i>n</i> = 53)	30 (37.7%)	33 (62.3%)		
School Level			7.61	.17
Primary (<i>n</i> = 111)	45 (40.5%)	66 (59.5%)		
Middle (<i>n</i> = 65)	33 (50.8%)	32 (49.2%)		
Secondary (<i>n</i> = 79)	48 (60.8%)	31 (39.2%)		
Other (<i>n</i> = 8)	4 (50.0%)	4 (50.0%)		
			Cont. Correlation	Phi
Title I Eligible			33.08**	-.36
Yes (<i>n</i> = 159)	56 (35.2%)	103 (64.8%)		
No (<i>n</i> = 107)	77 (71.0%)	30 (28.0%)		
Charter School			5.33*	-.16
Yes (<i>n</i> = 11)	1 (9.1%)	10 (90.9%)		
No (<i>n</i> = 243)	120 (49.4%)	123 (50.6%)		
Magnet School			6.17*	.17
Yes (<i>n</i> = 29)	21 (72.4%)	8 (27.6%)		
No (<i>n</i> = 222)	102 (45.9%)	120 (54.1%)		

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .001$, Bonferroni correction of .003 for significant p value.

A chi-square test for independence using Yates' continuity correction indicated a non-statistically significant association between RAMP status and identity as a charter school among the schools in this study: χ^2 (1, $N = 254$) = 5.33, $p < .05$, $\phi = -.16$ (Bonferroni corrected p value of .003). Of the 11 schools that were charter schools, 10 (90.9%) were non-RAMP schools and one (9.1%) was a RAMP school. However, schools that were not charter schools were evenly split between RAMP schools ($n = 120$, 49.4%) and non-RAMP schools ($n = 123$, 50.6%). Similarly, another chi-square test for independence using Yates' continuity correction indicated no statistically significant association between RAMP status and identification as a magnet school among the schools in this study: χ^2 (1, $N = 251$) = 6.17, $p < .05$, $\phi = .17$ (Bonferroni corrected p value of .003). Nonetheless, schools that identified as magnet schools ($N = 29$) were more often RAMP schools ($n = 21$, 72.4%) compared to non-RAMP schools ($n = 8$, 27.6%). Of the schools that did not identify as a magnet school ($n = 222$), 45.9% ($n = 102$) were RAMP and 54.1% ($n = 120$) were not RAMP.

Student Body Characteristics

The second research question examined whether schools whose school counseling programs have achieved RAMP differ in student body characteristics when compared to schools with school counseling programs that have not achieved RAMP status. A chi-square test for independence using Yates' continuity correction indicated a significant association between RAMP status and Title I eligibility among the schools in this study: $\chi^2 (1, N = 266) = 33.08, p < .001, \phi = -.36$. Of the schools eligible for Title I ($n = 159$), 56 (35.2%) were RAMP schools and 103 (64.8%) were non-RAMP schools. Conversely, 77 (71.0%) of the schools *not* eligible for Title I ($n = 107$) were RAMP schools, whereas 30 (28.0%) were non-RAMP schools. A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a significant difference in the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch based on RAMP ($M_{rank} = 114.19, Mdn = 38.71, M = 42.23, SD = 26.16$) and those schools that did not have RAMP ($M_{rank} = 148.29, Mdn = 53.63, M = 54.24, SD = 26.18, U = 6,345.00, z = -3.64, p < .001, r = .23$).

Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the percentages of students' race and ethnicity for RAMP and non-RAMP schools. The percentages were calculated by dividing the total number of students identified for each race/ethnic category by the total number of students at each school. Percentages were utilized versus total frequency counts to help understand the rates of students for each race and ethnicity category in the contexts of their schools. Of the race and ethnicity categories, one produced significant differences based on RAMP status. The RAMP schools in this study had a greater percentage of Asian students when compared to non-RAMP schools.

Table 2

Breakdown of Percentages of Students' Race/Ethnicity for RAMP and Non-RAMP Schools

Race/Ethnicity	Percentages for Each Race/Ethnicity Classification by RAMP Status								
	RAMP			Non-RAMP			U	z	r
	M_{rank}	M	SD	M_{rank}	M	SD			
White	128.90	57.96	26.92	133.50	52.64	31.47	8,243.00	-0.44	-
Black	141.12	16.94	19.24	121.11	17.98	24.81	7,209.00	-2.14	-
Hispanic	133.15	18.58	18.49	128.90	21.27	24.64	8,237.00	-0.45	-
Asian	152.80	6.38	8.47	109.69	3.51	6.23	5,701.50	-4.62*	.29
Hawaiian Pacific Islander	137.85	1.24	8.23	124.30	0.24	0.60	7,630.00	-1.54	-
American Indian	126.31	0.50	1.74	135.59	0.88	3.51	7,908.50	-1.00	-
Two or more races	146.31	4.33	3.12	119.79	3.56	3.13	7,021.50	-2.81*	-

Note. * = $p < .001$

Discussion

The first research question compared school characteristics of RAMP and non-RAMP schools, and we found that RAMP schools were more likely to have a larger student enrollment and more full-time

teachers compared to non-RAMP schools. In addition, RAMP schools were more likely to be located in suburban areas, whereas non-RAMP schools were more often in city, town, and rural settings. RAMP schools were more likely to be magnet schools and less likely to be charter schools; however, this was not found to be significant with the Bonferroni corrected p value. There were no differences in school level (i.e., elementary, middle, high) and pupil-to-teacher ratios as variables in either RAMP or non-RAMP schools. The second research question compared student body characteristics of RAMP and non-RAMP schools, and we found that non-RAMP schools were more likely to be Title I schools and serve low-income students compared to RAMP schools. Moreover, RAMP schools likely had more Asian students. There is little known about RAMP schools in relationship to students' demographic breakdown, and this finding provides some insight into the topic for continued research. This finding has a medium effect size, which indicates moderate practical significance. More research on the racial/ethnic breakdown of RAMP compared to non-RAMP schools is needed to make significant claims about this difference.

Although RAMP schools tended to have larger student enrollments than non-RAMP schools, RAMP schools were also likely to have more full-time teachers. With larger student bodies, more full-time staff might be needed and budgeted to address the capacity of students served. However, the data showed that larger school enrollments were often located in suburban areas. This finding raises the question about how certain contextual factors of schools play a role in comprehensive school counseling program development. For instance, it is possible that largely populated urban, township, or rural schools may have fewer full-time teachers, making it difficult to implement comprehensive counseling programs (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). With more full-time staff, school counselors who are pursuing the RAMP application process may benefit from increased access to full- and part-time staff to support program development; however, a report by Scafidi (2013) found that an increase in staffing in U.S. public schools did not necessarily appear to have positive outcomes for student achievement, such as test scores and graduation rates. More research is needed to understand how numbers of school staff members can support school counselors and counseling program development, implementation, and recognition. More importantly, students and their families can benefit from having increased access to full-time personnel to address their academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary needs. For example, Sink (2008) suggested that when elementary school teachers work collaboratively with school counselors, student learning and academic outcomes have the potential to improve and narrow achievement gaps among students. On the other hand, fewer full-time staff might be budgeted in schools with lower enrollments, thus having to share and delegate the many daily roles and responsibilities among fewer staff. Furthermore, having fewer FTE teachers may increase staff members' burdens, and the RAMP process could be perceived as additional tasks that take time away from their primary responsibilities.

Our results indicated the allocation of the RAMP designation differed based on location. The greater likelihood of RAMP schools being in suburban locations suggested that RAMP schools are often located in areas of increased access to school-based and community resources (Wright, 2012). With greater access to physical and financial resources, counselors can bridge and enhance their program planning and delivery for students. Since non-RAMP schools in this study were likely to be located in rural, township, and urban areas as well as serve more low-income students, these student populations might have less access to counseling services due to the challenges of funding and resource availability in their local communities. Also, these communities might serve higher populations of minority and low-income students (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997; Lee, 2005; Sutton & Pearson, 2002).

Although magnet and charter schools offer attractive nontraditional school and program choices to students and families, Archbald (1996) suggested that magnet schools either appealed to parents of higher educational attainment, or parents of higher educational attainment were better able to gain access to magnet schools. Parents of higher educational attainment are likely to have greater financial resources, and in addition, because of specialized programming, some magnet schools have even received increased educational funding (Archbald, 1996). It is possible that families of higher educational attainment and greater funding can afford schools and their school counseling programs with more resources to implement comprehensive counseling programs. Moreover, in a case study of a college counseling program in a charter high school, researchers suggested that the innovative nature of the charter school framework and structure may support the work of college counseling; however, school counselors may experience difficulties in implementing a comprehensive college counseling model due to the organizational challenges of sustaining a new school (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). Furthermore, charter schools may likely have smaller student enrollments and thus fewer full-time teachers budgeted for the programs, which connects to the present study's findings about non-RAMP schools. Both magnet and charter programs attract students based on various program characteristics, and further studies about school counselors' roles in school-choice programs is warranted. The ways in which schools are funded and managed can impact school counselors' access to developing and implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. Further research is needed to explore the characteristics of these school-choice programs and their connections with comprehensive school counseling programs.

Teacher-to-student ratios were not different when comparing RAMP and non-RAMP schools in our study, which is consistent with the mixed evidence about the impact of teacher-to-student ratios on student achievement. For instance, one study found that lower teacher-to-student ratios did not necessarily equate to higher test achievement (Alspaugh, 1994), while another study showed that lower teacher-to-student ratios increased student achievement (Schwartz, Schmidt, & Lose, 2012). Further research is not only needed about the potential impact of teacher-to-student ratios on school counseling programming, but also student-to-school counselor ratios on program development and delivery. Researchers found that Connecticut, Missouri, Nebraska, and Utah high schools with comprehensive school counseling programs and lower student-to-school counselor ratios were connected to lower disciplinary rates and higher attendance rates (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, and Stevenson, 2012; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012). It also could be beneficial to further understand how student-to-school counselor ratios impact RAMP programming.

School counselors and the programs they develop play critical roles in closing the achievement gap (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). RAMP schools submit closing-the-gap results reports as a component of the RAMP application to address an achievement or attainment gap within the context of their school and community, demonstrating that comprehensive school counseling programs work toward closing such gaps. It is possible that RAMP schools work toward closing the achievement and attainment gaps specific to their local settings; however, the findings of this study demonstrate that RAMP schools in totality might not be addressing the national educational gaps among students from low-income backgrounds. This study demonstrated that fewer low-income students and students who attended Title I schools are in RAMP schools, which highlights the issue of equity and access to comprehensive school counseling programs to support the academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary development of students. Dimmitt and Wilkerson (2012) found that schools in Rhode Island with higher percentages of minority students and those receiving free and reduced

lunch were less likely to have implemented comprehensive school counseling programs, which supports the findings of the present study. In addition, researchers found that students who attended poorer, diverse, and city school districts had less access to school counselors (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). However, research has demonstrated that when schools reduce the student-to-school counselor ratio to 250:1, as recommended by ASCA, students receiving free and reduced lunch at high-poverty schools had better academic outcomes (Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012). Research should continue to explore and question how RAMP schools work toward more globally closing the achievement gap in addition to addressing the gaps within their own local contexts.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings of this study indicate potential inequalities between RAMP-designated schools and non-RAMP schools. Specifically, the RAMP designation appears to be more often received in schools that: (a) have fewer students on free and reduced lunch, (b) have more students and FTEs, and (c) are less likely to be eligible for Title I. Thus, there are several implications for practice and research. School counselors whose principals are supportive and knowledgeable about school counselors' roles and programming can better facilitate implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs (Dodson, 2009; Fye, Miller, & Rainey, 2018). When school counselors are burdened by non-counseling duties, such as administrative tasks, substitute teaching, and lunch duty, they are less likely to devote the time, energy, and resources required to effectively implement components of the ASCA National Model. Therefore, it is critical that school counselors and principals view the ASCA National Model not as an added task, but rather an inherent element that guides program development, enhances student achievement, and supports underrepresented student groups who would not otherwise have access. School counselors can work with school administrations to advocate for the time and financial resources needed to implement components of the ASCA National Model.

As a tool to advocate for the merit of the ASCA National Model and the RAMP designation, scholars can develop and implement research studies that test and evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. For instance, Martin and Carey (2014) developed a logic model to guide evaluation of ASCA National Model programs, which offered a step toward understanding the connection between comprehensive school counseling programs and addressing issues related to the student achievement gap and outcomes. Also, Villares and Dimmit (2017) identified the top research priorities in the school counseling field, indicating that determining best practices related to school counseling interventions persists as highly ranked, as does evaluating the impact of comprehensive school counseling programs on students' academic development and achievement. Additional studies to test the effectiveness of the ASCA National Model are needed to attest to its merit as an evidence-based practice. For example, many evidence-based registries require interventions to have been researched using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, used an inactive control group, and been published in high quality journals (Brigman, Villares, & Webb, 2018; Mullen, Stevens, & Chae, 2019). Thus, researchers may want to develop rigorous study designs that provide merit for the ASCA National Model's effectiveness—an endeavor that has yet to be fulfilled in the literature despite the vast implementation of this model. Similarly, ASCA as an organization would likely benefit from providing resources and support to researchers to take on such endeavors. The need for increased use of the ASCA National Model is predicated on its effectiveness at enhancing students' educational, social and emotional, and career outcomes; consequently, research is vital to establish its credibility. Research on the effectiveness of the ASCA National Model will help develop its merit for stakeholders and enhance the ability to advocate for its implementation.

A key finding of our study is that schools that are lower staffed, smaller, and have students with lower SES are less likely to receive the RAMP designation. Based on the concept that higher implementation of the ASCA National Model will result in better student outcomes, it is imperative to increase access for schools with lower resources and higher needs. As the ASCA National Model asserts and ASCA as an organization believes school counselors to be agents of social justice, it is reasonable that measures are taken to increase the access to service implementation for smaller, lower staffed schools with a higher rate of students with lower SES. For example, ASCA could provide training materials or programs at a reduced rate for qualified schools or waive the application fee for schools that may not have access to such support locally. Similarly, ASCA could provide or facilitate mentor support for schools that may not have access to this type of support locally. Moreover, ASCA can support school counselors, especially those in Title I schools who serve larger populations of students and families who are from low SES backgrounds, by offering supervision or mentoring at no or limited cost to facilitate strengths-based partnerships with schools, families, and communities that have the potential to provide necessary resources and supports for students' academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary development (Bryan & Henry, 2008). School counselors, school counseling trainees, and school counselor educators are encouraged to be self-reflective as well as to engage in professional development practices connected to supporting students and families from low SES backgrounds (Cole & Grothaus, 2014). School counselors can gain awareness of and advocate for the challenges experienced by these students and families and also highlight their strengths and assets. While it is unlikely that any one individual or organization can cause a school to increase the number of school counselors at that site, it is relevant to continue advocacy efforts related to decreasing student ratios.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study compares school and student characteristics of RAMP and non-RAMP schools; however, the results do not attribute causality. Based on the findings, we can only make predictions based on the given characteristics of RAMP and non-RAMP schools. Another limitation is that CCD ELSi data neither identifies if schools have a presence of school counselors nor clarifies if schools include school counselors in the FTE category. We can be assured that the RAMP schools in this study have at least one school counselor, but it is unclear if school counselors are represented in our simple random sample of non-RAMP schools. Moreover, since there were only 133 RAMP schools in the 2015–2016 school year, the 133 non-RAMP schools selected for this study might not necessarily be an accurate representation of all U.S. public schools. Also, this study cannot account for or consider the individual qualities of school counselors in RAMP schools and how individual school counselors' professional identity, training, motivation, and other unique factors contribute to RAMP achievement.

Future research can explore the barriers and supports of pursuing and sustaining RAMP, like in Fye et al. (2018). Continued research is needed to understand how RAMP schools specifically address and work toward closing the achievement gap, which impacts students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Furthermore, although there are existing state-level studies of school counseling programs and their connections to student outcomes within individual states (Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, & Skytte, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012; Martin et al., 2009; Sink et al., 2008; Wilkerson et al., 2013), cross-comparison studies of state-by-state programs can be useful to see which states are highly represented among RAMP schools, and how these states' RAMP schools effectively facilitate the RAMP process. Such state-based studies also can explore the extent to which state-level funding and supports impact school counseling program development.

Conclusion

This study explored whether schools whose school counseling programs have achieved RAMP designation differ in general school and student body characteristics when compared to schools with school counseling programs that have not achieved RAMP status. The study utilized publicly available data from the CCD's ELSi to retrieve the school characteristics for RAMP schools and an equal-sized simple random sample of non-RAMP schools. The results showed that general school characteristics of RAMP schools differed from non-RAMP schools. Non-RAMP schools tended to be eligible for Title I, had more students eligible for free and reduced lunch, and were more likely to be in city, rural, and township communities. Non-RAMP schools also had fewer students and full-time teachers compared to RAMP schools. This study not only addressed issues of social justice as it pertains to socioeconomic status, geographic location, and race, but also explored the disparities in the types of schools and student populations that have or lack access to school counseling programs. School counselors, schools, and ASCA can collaborate and advocate on behalf of students to ensure that comprehensive school counseling programs serve and are equitably accessed by all students.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure

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