A Model of School Counselor Development: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The professional disciplines, developmental themes and milieus of school counselors are unique, differing from those of clinical mental health counselors. This article presents the findings from a qualitative study about the unique themes of school counselor development. The study followed the qualitative methodology utilized by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) in their seminal study of counselors and therapists. Presented here is a unique conceptual model of school counselor development, including the context, causal conditions, actions, intervening conditions and consequences. Implications for training and supervising of school counselors are discussed.

Key Words: *school counselor, training, supervision, developmental themes, development*

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This research was supported in part by a grant from Chi Sigma Iota.

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**Introduction**

The developmental themes of school counselors are unique, differing from those of clinical mental health counselors. School counselors practice in complex environments, have large case loads and often work in isolation (Lambie & Sais, 2009). In addition they are licensed and regulated by state educational agencies, not by state counseling boards. The school counselor’s role within the educational system is not only defined by educational agencies; it is also impacted by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which calls for educators, including school counselors, to be involved in efforts to close the achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Many studies have examined the influences on counselor development. These studies have led to the creation of various undifferentiated developmental models that offer a framework to understand the development of counselors (Bernard, 1979; Harvey, Hunt & Schroeder’s, 1961; Loganbill, Hardy & Delworth, 1982; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1981). However, these developmental models lacked school counselors as research participants and did they take into account 21st century school counselor’s scope of practice and roles as defined by the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) national model. This is problematic because counselor educators and supervisors utilize developmental models to set goals and understand supervisee’s developmental progress throughout training (Borders & Brown, 2009).

Furthermore because school counselors and clinical mental health counselors practice in very different environments and are faced with different challenges, it seems illogical to assume that they would have identical developmental themes. In fact the science of human development notes that the social, cultural, environmental, and historical context affect development (Bergan, 2007). In addition a novice’s use of newly learned skills as well as their ability to overcome new challenges depends on the values and structures of the environment in which their development occurs (Bergan, 2007; Kozulin, Gindis, Vladimir, & Miller, 2003). What is missing from the literature is a theory that conceptualizes the distinctive development of school counselors (Busacca & Wester, 2006).

This article presents findings from a qualitative study that conceptualizes the themes of school counselor development across the career lifespan. The final model presented here includes the context, content, actions, intervening conditions, and consequences that are unique to the development of school counselors. Counselor educators and site supervisors can utilize the findings to better prepare school counselors for their unique role in educational settings.

**School Counselor’s Unique Role**

The role of the school counselor is not solely defined by individual and group counseling sessions (ASCA, 2012). As faculty members in educational settings, school counselors are expected to contribute to the academic success of all students through the implementation and management of school-wide counseling programs (ASCA, 2010; ASCA, 2012; Martin, 2002). In fact 21st century school counseling programs are designed to impact the personal/social, academic and career development of all students (ASCA, 2010; ASCA, 2012; Martin, 2002).

In order to meet program development expectations school counselors engage in not only individual counseling and group counseling sessions but also classroom lessons, academic planning, program management, college and career readiness, parent education and more (ASCA, 2012). In addition, implementing and managing a school counseling program requires not only a unique skill set but also requires school counselors to function in a variety of capacities. In fact school counselors are described as not only counselors but also leaders, advocates, collaborators, and consultants (ASCA, 2012). These responsibilities are unique to school counselors and not accounted for in current developmental models. While the literature is unclear concerning the unique themes of school counselor development, it does point to unique needs for training in leadership, collaboration and program development (Colbert & Magouirk, 2003; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Sink & Yilik-Dower, 2001). Much of a school counselors training years are spent in practicum and internship courses acquiring these skills.

**Supervision**

It is in the practicum and internship classes where roles and skills are refined, theory and practice are integrated, and trainees explore their new professional identity. In fact internship is defined as the most critical experience in the training program (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), 2009; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Studer & Oberman, 2006). Counselor educators and site supervisors use supervision models to organize the content of individual and group supervision sessions with practicum and internship students. These supervision models provide a framework for organizing and overseeing the development of the supervisees’ counseling role, knowledge and skill set (Borders & Brown, 2009). Non-differentiated counselor supervision models conceptualize a counselors development around counseling skills. An example of this is the discrimination model, which organizes supervision around a trainee’s use of: (a) interventions, (b) conceptualization skills, (c) personalization in a counseling session and (d) professional behavior (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Borders & Brown, 2009).

Advances in the field of counselor supervision have led to the development of supervision models that are specific to school counselors. These models organize the unique content of school counselor supervision around the multiple roles of school counselors (Colbert, Vernon-Jones & Pansky, 2006; Luke & Bernard, 2006; Murphy & Kaffenberg, 2007; Studer & Oberman, 2006; Wood & Rayle, 2006). For example, Luke and Bernard’s (2006) school counselor supervision model fosters the development of not only counseling skills but also consulting and leadership skills. Murphy and Kaffenberg’s (2007) model organizes the supervision of school counselors around the ASCA national model. These unique supervision models can be used in practicum and internship courses to guide the development of today’s 21st century school counselor skills.

Although models specific to the supervision of school counselors have added the framework needed to organize and support the multiple roles of the school counselor, the developmental models used in the training and supervising of school counselors have remained unchanged. At best it is questionable whether these developmental models accurately and adequately reflect the unique development of today’s school counselor.

**A Model of Development: Skovholt and Ronnestad**

One of the developmental models that defines the development of counselors within a one on one counseling relationship was developed by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992). Participants in their study included 100 clinical counselors, therapists and psychologists (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Their inquiry surfaced 20 developmental themes, including: the influences of clients on counselor development, the important influence of post-training experiences, and the congruence between the counselor’s personality and their working style and client conceptualization. The question remains: Considering the unique scope of practice of school counselors, do these and the other 16 themes accurately capture all the themes of the development of school counselors?

To better understand the possible unique themes of school counselor development, the current study used the same 23 interview questions that Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) used in their seminal study. In addition the researchers used both their grounded theory methodology and their stratified process of selecting participants. However, the current study uniquely included 21 school counselors as research participants. The information thus discovered about causal conditions, context, actions, intervening conditions and consequential themes provides a unique and more comprehensive model of school counselor development.

**Research Question**

The goal of this study was to investigate a model of school counselor development, with the intent of addressing a gap in the literature about how school counselors develop. Specifically the research question was: What are the themes of school counselor development and how do they come together into one comprehensive model? Presented here is the final model that conceptualizes more comprehensively the development of the school counselor, including the context, causal conditions, actions, intervening conditions and consequences that contribute to school counselor’s development.

**Methods**

Grounded theory was selected as the research approach because it emphasizes theory, model development, and an understanding of the commonly-held constructions of reality (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). This method of inquiry emphasizes depth of understanding, as opposed to mere description of phenomena. In addition, grounded theory can capture shared experiences. Therefore it was the appropriate research method for this study. More specifically because the study sought to find a final theory that explains school counselor development the systematic, analytical grounded theory procedures of Corbin and Strauss (2008) were utilized.

**Instrument**

The primary researcher had seven years of experience as a school counselor in a Title One, inner city school. She received both her master’s degree and doctoral degree from CACREP certified universities in a southern state. She was recognized as the School Counselor of the Year in a southern state. She also received the American Counseling Association’s Ross Trust Scholarship and served on a state committee that created the fifth edition of that state’s school counseling program model, which was based on ASCA’s national model.

Four additional researchers formed a committee with her and participated in the constant comparative data analysis process. The committee included three counselor educators, one of who was an expert in grounded theory research. Two committee members had been school counselors before becoming counselor educators. The fourth member was a nationally recognized director of counseling in a southern state.

**The Selection of Participants**

In order to capture common themes across school counselors with various levels of experience, the research committee intentionally selected information-rich participants categorized according to the length of their experience as school counselors. The participants in each of the stratified categories were corresponded to the five developmental phases established by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992): (a) three beginning student school counselors (BSC), (b) four advanced student school counselors (ASC), (c) Five novice school counselors (NSC), (d) four experienced school counselors (ESC), and (e) five senior school counselors (SSC). Each participant was identified with a code such as BSC1, or ASC1 in order to track data back to the original source.

**Selection process.** Selection of participants was an ongoing, two-step process. The first step was the purposeful selection of knowledgeable, professionally active counselor educators and directors of school counselors. These individuals then assisted in the second step: identifying potential participants who were information-rich. Criteria for selection of participants included having at least two of the following criteria: leadership in the field of school counseling either in the district or the profession, understanding or use of the ASCA model, favorable professional evaluations or grades, or recognition by professional organizations for excellence in the field of school counseling.

In accordance with grounded theory’s requirement of constant comparison, the participants were not pre-selected merely because they fell into some length-of-service group. Rather, the selection of each participant was dictated by the totality of the previous interviews and concurrent analysis process, known as theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Because of the constant comparative practice, the counselor educators and directors of counseling continued to assist in the selection process throughout the seven months of data collection.

**Summary of participants***.* All 21 participants were either in training to become school counselors or were already employed as school counselors. Participants did not have a degree higher than a master’s in counseling, nor were they pursuing such a degree. The participants ranged in age between 30 and 62. Three were lead counselors; 10 had experience in a high school setting; and seven, in a middle school setting. Four had experience in two levels of school counseling, including elementary. One had previous experience as a district director of counseling and three were promoted to district positions within months after being interviewed. Six held professional offices in state or national school counselor organizations; one was elected president of a southern state school counselor association following this study. One was a national school counselor of the year and one was a state school counselor of the year. Eleven university counselor-training programs from three different states were represented. Participants represented eight different school districts, both urban and rural, in a southern state.

**Trustworthiness**

To assure trustworthiness the lead researcher spent seven months immersed in the interview and analysis process. In addition the data analysis process included a committee of three counselor educators and one expert qualitative researcher. In addition audit trails were kept that tied support for categories and the final theory all the way back to the original transcripts. Furthermore participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy, four participants were re-interviewed and all participants gave feedback concerning the accuracy of the final model. The research team also continually checked the growing data against relevant published research on counselor development and school counselor practices. The team also reviewed for, discerned and addressed potential bias.

Feedback from participants supported the findings. For example one participant stated, “It sounds just like I wrote it!” (BSC2). In addition the findings aligned in some places with published works on counselor development. For example according to Skovholt and Ronnestad overwhelmed as well. Furthermore participants who were re-interviewed were able to confirm and refine the themes such as the K-12 environmental impact.

To guard against the possibility of undue influence from biases, the researchers used extensive reflection and sensitivity throughout the research process. They constantly examined all input from themselves and their colleagues for bias that could skew inferences and conclusions. They also strictly adhered to the correct use of analytic tools--writing analytic memos and a rigorously detailed field journal as they continually diagramed the emerging theory. These practices fostered comprehensive reflectivity and deep sensitivity in the analysis of data. Throughout the research, the committee invested time in reflecting on uncovering personal assumptions and interpretations, compensating for them, and thereby avoiding inadvertently biasing the data. Throughout the analytic process the researchers were open to all possible meanings and potential relationships among concepts

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The research team used a short, closed-ended questionnaire to collect initial demographic information from the participants. The qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview process. The study used the same 23 interview questions asked of participants in Skovholt and Ronnestad’s (1992) original study. All interviews were conducted at the participants’ office or, in the case of student participants; interviews were conducted in university classrooms. Each of the 21 interviews were conducted within a seven month time frame and each interview took between 1.5 – 2.0 hours. Each interviewee was assigned a code based on their level of experience and the order of the interview. For example BSC1 is a beginning school counselor, and BSC2 is also a beginning school counselor. The one and two designation indicates two separate participants. This participant and data tracking system allowed the researchers to track the data back to the original transcripts and participant.

In addition to the 21 first round interviews, five participants were re-interviewed for a more in-depth understanding of the data. All interviews were audio- and video-recorded. To make possible continuous and deep interaction with the data, the lead researcher transcribed all the audio recordings. In addition all participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy.

The constant comparative process utilized in this study involved simultaneously analyzing data, selecting the next participant, reentering the field to conduct additional interviews to collect more data for the ongoing analysis. Participants in each of the five time-bound stratified categories of beginning trainee, advanced trainee, novice, experienced and senior school counselors were selected based on data from within that category. In addition each of the participant categories were increased simultaneously. Immediately after each interview the researcher wrote detailed field notes and logged reactions and insights to aid in the data analysis. The data analysis process that occurred between interviews involved open coding of the data to describe the categories, axial coding to classify the data and identify categories, and selective coding to interrelate the categories and discover a story within the data.

The transcripts from each interview were open coded after each interview. Open coding involved highlighting significant statements and words that provided an understanding of the participant’s experiences. Grounded theory techniques utilized to identify significant words and statements included exploring various meanings of words (such as *magic*), waving the red flag (such as *never do counseling*), looking at language (such as *student* or *client*), and looking at expressed emotions (such as *frustration* and *overwhelmed*). The 21 interviews and five follow up interviews resulted in two, three-inch binders of transcripts and highlighted codes.

During the axial coding process the highlighted codes were reorganized into categories using excel spread sheets. Memos about concepts, insights, thoughts, and even questions concerning the data were created to aid in the development of categories. As the memo and coding process continued, categories became more complex. These categories changed as each additional interviews resulted in additional open coded data. In fact categories continually merged and separated throughout the coding process. For example early in the axial coding process there appeared to be six causal conditions of school counselor development, but in the final analysis the data supported only two causal condition categories: environment and desire to help all students. Examples of questions that aided in identifying categories included: what was the relationship of one concept to another (such as *academic and counseling responsibilities*); what were the larger structural issues (such as the *school system* or the *university program*)? Axial coding was a complex, fluid process that after seven months of analysis resulted in the final 14 themes. Table 1 includes a summary of the final 14 themes.

The selective coding process was also ongoing. During selective coding analysis the researchers interrelated the categories to tell a story and created diagrams to depict the emerging model of development. As the categories in the axial coding process changed, the diagrams in the selective coding process also changed. In fact diagrams took on various forms from Venn diagrams to concentric circles to columns with solid lines and finally dotted lines to portray the fluid nature of the categories. Questions asked of the data that helped reconnect the data included but were not limited to: What are the problems and concerns being shared across the stratified categories (such as *theory use* and *program development*)? Are actions (such as *program development*) and consequences (such as *growth oriented*) similar for the participants?

In the final stage of analysis the team asked practical questions of the data to confirm saturation had been achieved. For example, were concepts well developed (such as *landslide of need)* and was the theory logical? Saturation was achieved when all research committee members agreed that the data was repeating what had already been stated and no new categories were found. In addition there was consensus that the developed categories had density and variation that demonstrated richness and complexity. Finally research participants were asked to read and comment on the final model. All participants agreed that the findings captured their experience. One participant commented that these findings sounded just like her personal story and situation (ASC1). The final analysis produced a model of school counselor development along with a description of the phenomenon, causal conditions, context, actions, intervening conditions and consequences.

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| Table 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Themes in School Counselor Development* | | | |  |  |  |
| Category | Causal Conditions | Context | Core Phenom- enon | Actions | Intervening Conditions | Consequ- ences |
| Themes | School Environ- ment | Over- whelming Numbers | Balance | Program Development | Professional Involvement | Growth Oriented |
|  | Desire to Help All | Broad Scope of Need |  | Counseling | Consulting | Unified |
|  |  |  |  |  | Mentors | Flexible |
|  |  |  |  |  | Learning |  |

**Findings and Results**

The findings presented here include the causal conditions, contexts, actions, intervening conditions and consequences that shape the phenomena of the development of school counselors. The final selective coding analysis produced a shared “story” that contributed to the final model of school counselor development.

**Causal Conditions in the Development of School Counselors**

Grounded theory defines causal conditions as conditions that influence or cause the phenomenon to occur (Creswell, 2007). Two overarching causal conditions emerged from the data: the environment in which school counselors’ work and the school counselors’ desire to help all students. These causal conditions influence the development of the school counselor both externally and internally.

**Environment.** One causal condition that influences the development of school counselors is the educational system itself. All participants, from those in training to senior practitioners, mentioned that the school system would or does directly impact their work as a school counselor. One participant stated, “I think to be an effective school counselor you need to know how schools work…. It is important to be grounded in the educational system in order to be effective in what we do” (ESC1). In addition relationships with other school professionals must be fostered and developed. One participant summed this up by stating, “I have to work with teachers to see kids or do guidance. I can’t just pull a kid from class” (NSC2). Daily interactions with staff ranged from coordinating classroom-based counseling lessons to finding time for groups or for talking with students about credit recovery.

The impact of the environment as a causal condition is further evidenced by how school counselors select and/or use counseling theories in their work. Participants spoke about theories according to how these theories worked within the expectations of school systems. One participant stated, “I like Adlerian because I think it works [well] in the school system” (BSC1). Later she added, “But my site supervisor says I’ll end up using things like solution-focused the majority of the time. So it [Adlerian] sounds good, but this is the real world.”

The environmental influence on the development of school counselors is further evidenced by the fact that the participants did not focus exclusively on the individual student but simultaneously they focused on the campus as a whole. Multiple participants used the analogy of tending to an entire forest while attempting to not lose sight of the individual trees (ESC1, ESC2, SSC2). While they were concerned about the individual student, they were also acutely aware of their responsibility to the entire school.

The final evidence that emerged from the data concerning the environment as a causal condition was that the participants adopted educational language. Not only did participants continually use the language of professional educators such as “adequate yearly progress (AYP),” “no child left behind (NCLB),” “graduation rates,” “504’s” and “school reform” but more significantly the word *student* replaced the word *client*. One participant clearly summed up the influence of the educational setting by stating he was “uncomfortable using the word ‘client’ to refer to students because I don’t see them as clients” (ESC1).

**Desire to Help All Students.** The second causal condition is a drive to meet the personal/social needs of all students. All participants in this study spoke passionately about their desire to help not just many students but all students. One experienced participant summed this up by saying, “I was going to fix everybody and change the world” (ESC2). Participants communicated that they strongly believed that school counselors can make and do make large-scale, meaningful impact on the students’ lives. Both the desire to help all students and the environment itself are causal conditions that influence the development of school counselors.

**Core Phenomenon of School Counselor Development**

The core phenomenon in grounded theory is identifying what is central to the process being studied (Creswell, 2007). In this research the development of school counselors is the core phenomenon. Balance emerged as central to the process of their development. Participants envisioned balance as synthesizing apparently irreconcilable expectations and role conflicts into one final, integrated and balanced school counseling practice.

Research uncovered many ways in which roles diverged and expectations differed. One area that balance was sought was between training and school counseling practices. Participants alluded to their need to balance individual counseling practices with implementing counseling programs, as well as a need to balance between focusing on the individual student and focusing on all students at the same time. Participants talked about needing to balance or bring together the views of university professors and site supervisors. Finally, participants sought balance and integration in their work to fulfill both counseling roles and educational roles, and to meet both the students’ personal/social needs and their academic/career needs.

The need for balance is evidenced by the participants’ discussion of their experiences as school counselors as if two separate parts were being brought together. Participants said they felt out of balance when they overly engaged in one part of their role while neglecting the other. For example, one participant stated, “You do what you have to for the [university professor] class and then you get to where you are going and you adjust to the site supervisor” (ASC2). Another participant said, “It is getting so complicated and we’re accountable up the line for mental health and educational objectives” (SSC3).

**Context of the Development of the School Counselor**

*Context* in grounded theory is defined as the properties or conditions in which actions are taken to manage the phenomenon, or in this case, the context in which the development of the school counselor occurs (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The three contextual themes that emerged from the data included overwhelming numbers of students, the broad scope of need and responsibilities, and finally unpredictability. These themes in turn influence the actions taken by school counselors to manage development.

**Overwhelming Number of Students.** The overwhelming number of students as a contextual condition was reflected in all the participants’ habitual use of the word “ratio.” Every participant was acutely aware of the ratio of students to counselor on their campus, and it was often described as a “landslide.” One participant concisely summed this up by stating, “The responsibility is placed on us to make an impact on this huge ratio” (NSC5).

Compounding the landslide of students are “frequent fliers,” students who continually came to the counselor’s office to talk even after working through the original issue. Frequent fliers also included students who had no initial reason to see the school counselor but continually came by to visit. One participant explained this unique theme by stating, “Kids come to me a lot for information and validation and they keep coming back over and over” (SSC2).

**Broad Scope of Need and Responsibilities.** It is not just the “landslide” of student numbers that overwhelms school counselors. It is also the broad scope of student needs and the various additional academic needs and responsibilities that school counselors are expected to manage. One participant summarized the broad scope of responsibilities by stating, “I do a lot of things, but I don’t do a lot of things well. I just work to check them off, students and papers alike. It is crazy!” (NSC5).A novice participant chronicled problems she sees in a week:

Divorce, thoughts of suicide, gender issues, domestic abuse in the home, abandonment, relationship issues, socialization, bullies, violent behavior, anger, teacher issues, cutters, [and] students on campus with diagnoses like bipolar, depressive, autism, [and] ADHD. It is not just academic things such as dyslexia; there are drop-out rates, graduation plans, tardies, school climate, skipping school, scholarships, death in the family, fights, anxiety, [and] impulsiveness. Shall I go on? (NSC1).

Participants also commonly commented on their many academic responsibilities. They reported having responsibilities in relation to scholarship applications, 504 meetings, scheduling, college and career readiness, students’ failing courses, credit recovery, career days, college fairs and so forth. One participant reflected this common sentiment by saying “I knew the other stuff was there, but I had no idea what to expect as far as how much work it was, all the details” (NSC3).

**Unpredictable nature of their job.** Unpredictability was the third contextual theme that emerged from the data. It was not surprising that all the participants felt that they were at the mercy of the chaotic school day. This is evidenced by the word “chaos” being used 27 times by the novice school counselor participants alone. One participant stated, “You don’t know what fight there will be, what teacher will send what kid, or even if there is a fire drill, parent showing up, or a ringing phone” (SSC1). Unpredictability was evidenced not only by respondents’ interviews but also by what occurred before and during the interviews. One participant had four teachers and five students stop by and two parents call her during the interview (ESC3). In fact every interview, save one, was riddled with phones ringing, knocks on doors and even a fire drill.

**Actions Taken by School Counselors**

To manage the causal conditions and contextual themes mentioned above, school counselors engage in certain behaviors or actions. Actions are defined as strategies that are employed by individuals during the process being studied (Creswell, 2007). These actions include counseling, developing school counseling programs and uniting both themselves as professionals and their programs with the school’s goals.

**Counseling.** The data indicated thatone of the actions taken by school counselors to manage development was how they used counseling skills with individuals. Participants did not experience their use of counseling skills with individuals as being the same as the skills of clinical mental health counselors. Participants referred to counseling in schools as “not being deep” counseling but rather as “skimming the surface.” The level or kind of counseling skills used by school counselors is best described by the participants’ own words as (a) “a quick fix” (SSC2), (b) “putting out fires” (NSC5), (c) “band aids” (ASC2), or (d) “superficial” (NSC4). They reported feeling that others expected them to have (e) “magic” (NSC2), or (f) “fairy dust” (NSC3).

One participant captured the way school counselors work in individual counseling sessions. She said, “You get to do a little bit with them [students]. You see places to go deeper, but you know at the same time there are probably another 20, 30, 40, [or] 50 kids that need that too” (NSC4). While participants were aware of how counseling skills in schools differed from clinical mental health counselor skills, they were also aware that they were responsible to develop school counseling programs.

**Program Development.** Participants saw counseling programs as a vital part of school counseling. Participants proudly shared stories about the success of various elements of their counseling programs. For example one participant described the success of a mentoring program where he brought in a group of Hispanic women to mentor the Hispanic girls on campus (ESC3).

It is interesting to note how strongly the counseling program was experienced as synonymous with the practice of counseling individuals. Participants answered questions that were about counseling individuals from the perspective of counseling *programs*. For example when asked if they thought school counseling was structured and organized or unstructured and ambiguous, participants described the counseling program, not what occurs in an individual counseling session. Specifically one participant stated that programs needed to be structured and organized to avoid getting off task due to being scattered and thus losing effectiveness (ESC1).

**Uniting with the school system.** The final action theme that emerged from the data was uniting with the school goals. School counselors are aware of working to link not only their counseling program to the school’s goals but also to establish their own unique role as professionals within the system. Participants built relationships with multiple stake-holders to establish themselves as valuable and unique professionals in the school setting. One experienced school counselor stated, “I knew I had made it when a teacher said to me ‘we did it’” (ESC2).

**Intervening Conditions Affecting the Development of School Counselors**

Intervening conditions are broad structural conditions that impact action strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Intervening conditions played an important part in the optimum development for school counselors. These conditions included: consulting other school counselors, involvement in professional organizations, mentors, and learning.

**Consulting with Other School Counselors.** At all stages of their developmentconsulting with fellow school counselors was experienced as being helpful. One participant shared how she thought she would accomplish implantation of a counseling program by “Talk[ing] to the principal to get to do counseling… but asking colleagues is more effective” (NSC2). Also helpful to participants were networks of school counselors that expanded beyond their school district. One participant stated, “[What] really helps me is talking to people, especially people who are professionally involved, getting a feel for what is going on. I like to know that counselors from other states and districts are dealing with that we are dealing with, the same issues, and what they are doing” (ESC1).

**Professional Involvement.** Involvement in professional organizations not only expanded the participant’s collegial relationships but also fostered their growth as school counselors. Three experienced participants shared how continued involvement in professional organizations fostered a positive identity and reinforced their motivation to press for change in the overall school system (ESC1, ESC2, ESC4). Participants mentioned national organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), as well as state counseling associations.

**Mentors.** Mentors play a positive part in the development of school counselors. According to the data, mentors encourage leadership development, functioned as a type of supervisor, normalized experiences, offered advice and encouraged school counselors to effect change. Mentors included university professors, district directors and other school counselors. Two participants in this study stated that it was a mentor who helped them maintain both a professional outlook and to continue to advocate and see themselves as leaders (ESC1, SSC2). Another respondent stated, “Looking back, my director played a crucial role in my seeing myself as a professional counselor and leader on my campus” (ESC2).

**Learning.** The final intervening condition that emerged from the data was learning. Learning accrued from course work as well as on-the-job experience. Learning focused not only on how to implement programs but also on ways to be more effective with students. Participants sought out ways to intervene and help students with their numerous personal/social, academic and career needs. Participants insisted that content learning alone was not enough. One participant said, “I never thought it [course work] didn’t apply, the trick was figuring out how it did” (NSC4).

**Consequences of Effective Development of School Counselors**

Consequences are the outcomes or results of the actions taken under the perceived conditions in the process of carrying out the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The actions taken in the development of school counselors resulted in integrated, growth-oriented professionalism. One participant expressed this by stating, “It is easy to say school counselors aren’t supposed to be concerned with academics, but we are team players, and we have to work together [with the faculty and academic policies] to keep the school whole” (SSC1).

School counselors are trained to work flexibly with other professionals to help an entire school of students as well as to manage the chaos of the day. The consequences theme was summed up by one participant who stated, “School counseling becomes about finding a balance--knowing who we are in the school system and sticking to that role, working to help each kid and also every kid, switching lanes depending on the current need. It isn’t easy!” (SSC3).

**Discussion and Implications**

The final theory of school counselor development includes 14 themes. The causal conditions that lead to the phenomenological experience of development include the educational environment and a desire to help all students. These conditions exist prior to school counselors entering training and are the framework within which development occurs. The contextual conditions within the framework, or realities within the context of development, include the large number of students, the broad scope of needs and responsibilities as well as the unpredictable nature of a school day faced by school counselors. The context and causal conditions impact the core phenomenon which is defined as seeking a balance between what is experienced as many dichotomies within the field of school counseling. To manage development school counselors take action. These actions include counseling, developing a program and uniting with the school system. During development several conditions intervene to assist with development. These conditions include consulting, involvement in professional organizations, mentors and learning. In the end development results in flexible, unified, and growth oriented school counselors.

The findings of this study indicate that the development of school counselors and the development of clinical mental health counselors are not identical. Undifferentiated models of counselor development do not account for many categories, or themes, that are specific to the development of school counselors. For example while the current developmental models do address the development of individual counseling skills they do not address the overwhelming number of clients and mental health needs faced by school counselors. In addition these models do not include the categories or themes of ‘program development’ and ‘uniting with school systems.’ Also current models completely lack the central developmental theme of ‘balance.’

In order for theories to be helpful they must be true (Borders & Brown, 2009). Implications based on the findings from this study suggest that counselor educators and site supervisors should utilize a developmental model that accurately conceptualizes the categories or themes of school counselor development. The model presented in this article can be used to better prepare school counselors for their unique role on school campuses.

**Influences of Causal Conditions and Context**

The two causal conditions of a desire to help all students and the environment in which school counselor’s work pervasively affect all areas of their development. This is not surprising, given the substantial influence of environment on development (Kozulin, Gindis, Vladimir, & Miller, 2003). In addition the contextual themes of overwhelming number of students, the broad scope of student needs, and the unpredictable nature of the school day impact the actions taken by school counselors’. These actions include how they counsel individual students, how they develop counseling programs and how they unite themselves and the counseling program with the school where they work.

**Development of Individual Counseling Skills.** The school counselor’s individual counseling skills are impacted by their desire to help all students as well as the overwhelming number of students and student needs. To help so many students with so many needs school counselors engage in individual counseling that is described as a “quick fix,” “putting out fires” and a “band-aide.” Participants noted that, individual counseling sessions are often used to “teach students skills” and for “problem solving.”

The counseling skills described by participants in this study, such as problem solving and teaching are often practiced in early stages of training (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992). These early skills mirror the skills of lay helpers such as ministers, friends, and teachers. Lay helpers are often overly involved with those whom they are helping and have a strong identification with the problem, which results in an inclination to give specific advice. Bernard and Goodyear (2009) further add that the lay helper is prone to boundary problems and usually expresses sympathy as opposed to empathy.

Great strides in skill development are made within a supervisory relationship during the early years of practice. However, school counselors lack clinical supervision after graduation (Murphy & Kaffenberg, 2007; Studer & Oberman, 2006). In addition advancement in counseling skills comes through learning theories, ethical standards and basic counseling concepts (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). This study found that causal conditions such as environment and a desire to help all students impacted school counselor’s exploration of both theories and course content. The impact of the causal conditions on learning in turn, impacts school counselor’s implementation and advancement of counseling skills. Because current developmental models do not take into account the causal themes of environment and a desire to help all students, using these models to understand school counselor development may be detrimental to their training.

**Program Development.** Just as the two causal themes of the desire to help all students and the educational setting impact counseling skill development they also impact the development of counseling programs. Program development is not accounted for in current developmental models. While school counselors desire to help all students it is improbable that school counselors can meet the overwhelming need of so many students through individual counseling. It appears that developing a counseling program, or particular elements of the counseling program, allows school counselors to manage the overwhelming number of students as well as the many personal/social, academic and career needs of students. While school counselors still engage in individual and group counseling, program development becomes necessary in order to reach as many students as possible. Program development would also seem to satisfy some of the desire to help all students. In addition results of this study also reveal a sense of pride in the counseling program’s ability to meet not only individual student needs but also campus-wide needs.

An implication based on these findings is that school counselors have a unique dual focus in their counseling practice that is not captured in current developmental models. School counselor’s focus on not only helping the individual student but also on impacting all students as well. Part of school counselors’ development includes learning to balance their focus on the individual student with their focus on the school as a whole. This dual focus is in alignment with Colbert, Vernon-Jones, and Pransky (2006) findings that state school counselors need to shift their current focus from not just the individual student but also to a school-wide focus. This dual focus is significantly different from the clinical mental health counselor’s single focus on individual counseling sessions. Current developmental models neglect the unique dual perspective and skill set needed by school counselors.

**Uniting.** The context and causal conditions of the development of school counselors also impact the theme of uniting. The theme of uniting with a school system is unique for school counselors and is not accounted for in current development models. These conditions create a drive for counselors to unite themselves as counselors and their counseling program to the school within which they work. Uniting can be defined as the school counselors ability to unify the counseling program with the overall school system. This includes establishing goals that are united with the school system as well as implementing programs that impact the school system. Participants felt closely connected to the faculty with which they worked and spoke about “team work” and feeling that they were part of a larger system. Collegial relationships seemed to create a feeling of “connection.”

To be effective in their role school counselors work in partnership with other professionals on their campus. School counselors must coordinate with teachers and principals to see students, conduct counseling lessons or even to implement school wide programs. Being a team player results in shared success stories and the ability to develop elements of a counseling program. However, participants did not describe teamwork as being a collaborative relationship. Instead they perceived uniting with faculty as a way to implement elements of their own counseling programs.

**Intervening Conditions**

Current developmental models do acknowledge the impact of various influences on counselor development. Examples of these influences include clients and more advanced professionals in the field. What is not noted in these models is how school counselor program development is influenced by intervening conditions. A model that is unique to school counselor development would capture the unique developmental influences on all developmental themes. Intervening conditions, such as consulting with other school counselors, mentors and involvement in professional organizations, all appear to ground school counselors in their school counseling identity and practices.

**Practices within the Training of School Counselors**

The findings indicate that the training and supervision of school counselors must incorporate a balanced approach to the development of skill sets essential to both individual counseling and program development, as well as how to foster uniting with the education system. However, counselor educators typically attribute more importance to concepts that fit within traditional training models, such as individual and group counseling, than they do to concepts outside the traditional counselor training framework (Colbert, Vernon-Jones, & Pransky, 2006).

In addition the highest time demands on school counselor site supervisors includes responsive services and accountability practices (Studer & Oberman, 2006) as well as individual planning and the development of counseling core curriculum lessons (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006) both school counselor roles defined by ASCA. It is ironic that current training practices themselves model the separation of individual counseling skills and program development skills, with training programs focusing on individual counseling skills and site supervisors focusing on program development skills.

This practice is worrisome because development occurs through interaction between a novice practitioner and more skilled professionals. The spilt between the university supervisors’ practices and those of the site supervisors seems to fall short of modeling the central theme of balance, or brining together what seems to be opposing practices. If training practices cannot demonstrate a single concept of the practices of school counselors, this would seem to be a poor and conflicting introduction to their profession. This dissonance between training and practice is not a new concept. Brott and Myers’ (1999) identified “a major theme that is repeated throughout the literature related to the professionalization of school counseling relates to dissonance or conflict between school counselor preparation and the realities of the work environment” (p. 340).

Based on these findings it would seem that counselor educators and site supervisors should work together to foster balanced development. In addition the use of individual counseling practices within a school setting should be clearly distinguished from that of a clinical setting. School counselor training should also include unique referral practices to manage large case-loads. Furthermore educators may balance the use of individual counseling skills with the management of a counseling program to meet the landslide of counseling needs and academic concerns of school systems. Finally including training in system theory may enhance school counselor training.

**Conclusion**

Using current counselor developmental models to train 21st century school counselors leaves many school counselor developmental categories or themes unrecognized. Themes such as program development and uniting as well as the central theme of balance are not part of current counselor models. As a result school counselors are not being prepared for their counseling role in an educational setting. In order to prepare school counselors for their unique role in schools it is imperative that counselor educators understand the unique developmental themes of school counselors, including the causal conditions, context, actions, intervening conditions and consequences that are presented here. Without the skills and training to be able to function within the counseling program components school counselor’s time will likely continue to be allocated to non-counseling duties (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Colbert, Vernon-Jones & Pransky, 2006; McGlothlin & Miller, 2008; Studer, 2006).

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is that all participants in this study had various amounts of teaching experience. This may have been a variable that inadvertently affected the resulting themes. In addition, as mentioned in the description of the participants all participants were currently working in 6th -12th grade settings, with four participants having experience working in grades K-5. While doubtful this may have had an impact on the findings. Finally the questions from Skovholt and Ronnestad’s (1992) were adapted by changing the word *counseling* to *school counseling*. Although this seems to be a minor, necessary change, it may have had an unknown influence on participants’ understanding of the questions.

**Further Studies**

The findings in this study indicate a need for continued research in the area of school counselors’ development. Research should be conducted to reveal how the use of school counselor developmental models, that capture their unique themes of development, impacts the supervision and training of school counselors. In addition research with additional elementary school counselors might strengthen this study’s findings. In addition based on these findings research should be conducted to identify best practices in meeting training needs of school counselors. Finally, a study concerning how the school counselor is affected by the dissonance between training practices and actual school counseling practices should be done.

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