

Table 2
Regression Findings – Attitudes & Self-Efficacy

	R2	S.E	Estimate		
Full Model	.042 a	.483			
Personal Deficiency			.201	.187	.221
Stigma Attitudes			.084	-.044	-.067
Structural Attitudes			-.070	-.036	-.049
Restricted Model	.040c	.482			
Personal Deficiency			.201	.201	.201
Factor			r	Semi-partial	Beta

*p<.05

^aF(3, 270) = 3.921, p = 0.009

^cF(1, 270) = 11.285, p = 0.001

The Experiences of Elementary School Counselors Working with Gifted Students: Utilizing the ASCA National Model

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Abstract

An element of a comprehensive school counseling model is to support students identified as gifted and their unique social, emotional, and behavioral issues that they may face. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of elementary school counselors working with gifted students within the framework of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. Researchers conducted a thematic analysis of participants' responses in semi-structured interviews and identified themes related to the participants' counseling practices with gifted students.

Keywords: gifted students, ASCA Model, school counseling, qualitative research

Professional school counselors are called upon to provide counseling services to an extremely diverse population of students with a range of social, emotional, and behavioral needs that individually or collectively may interfere with their ability to learn (Davis, 2015). Ghandour et al. (2019) reported that feelings of anxiety, stress, and aggression are on the rise among children in the U.S. Therefore, today's students experience a myriad of internal

and external influences that seem to play a direct role in affecting their academic performance, peer relationships, and general mental health. In response to addressing the mental health needs of students, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) adopted a position statement encouraging professional school counselors to identify and respond to the need for mental health and behavioral interventions that promote wellness for all students (ASCA, 2015). The mental health needs of students are often unmet in schools around the country (DeKruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013; Maag & Katsiyannis, 2010). Furthermore, students from diverse cultural groups are even less likely to receive appropriate services (Panigua, 2014).

One cultural subgroup of students within schools who have higher academic abilities, termed gifted, is not immune from needing mental and emotional support from the professional school counselor (Levy & Plucker, 2008). However, these students are regularly overlooked as not needing counseling services in schools (Gibbons & Hughes, 2016). Professional school counselors are leaders and

advocates in creating safe and positive academic learning environments for all students, including gifted students (Stambaugh & Wood, 2018).

Literature Review

As our nation becomes more diverse, our educational institutions are reflecting more diverse student bodies as well. Students, who could be identified gifted, are present in schools in all grades, races, genders, and from all socioeconomic levels (National Association of Gifted Children [NAGC], 2011). Gifted children are usually identified in elementary school when teachers, professional school counselors or parents, refer the student for a formal educational evaluation (Silverman, 1993; Stambaugh & Wood, 2018). Early identification is important so that they can participate in differentiated educational opportunities and pathways that tap into their ability and potential (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2012). This is the optimal time for gifted children should be recognized so that educators can plan to provide differentiated educational opportunities to maximize a gifted child's ability and potential. While the identification process varies across school districts and amongst states, the outcome should be centered on the child receiving necessary differentiation and modifications to a school's curriculum so that the child can be challenged in school (NAGC, 2009; Rotigel, 2003). Most districts have a screening and selection process that include aptitude or achievement assessments so that students are not subjectively placed in special programs (ASCA, 2019). Regardless of a child's academic achievement or performance, and regardless of the identification cutoff score in a particular school or in any particular state, a child who is intellectually

gifted is consistently at the higher end of the academic bell curve (NAGC, 2009).

Training of Elementary School Counselors and the Gifted

Early recognition and appropriate counseling interventions of gifted students within a school setting increases the probability of future extraordinary achievement over the life span and reduces the risk for later social, behavioral, emotional, and/or educational problems (Harrison, 2005). These youth are at risk for underachievement, dropping out of school, poor peer relationships, high stress levels, and depression (Colangelo, 2003; Colangelo & Davis, 2002; Robinson, 2008; Wood, 2010). The social, emotional, and behavioral development of gifted children has received some attention within gifted education journals (Wood, 2010). However, not as much information has been published in journals specific to school counseling (Wood, 2018) though school counselors are usually the first line of defense in supporting students affective and behavioral needs in schools (Adams, 2014). Professional school counselors could greatly benefit not only from research that incorporates a systemic approach but also from practical applications as well (Myers & Pace, 1986).

Building upon this assertion, Van Tassel-Baska (2009) suggested that in order for human external influences to be productive in children's lives, adults must be trained in relevant skills, select interventions, and ensure that the systems within which they function are attuned to the need for flexibility in implementation. Thus, it is critical that professional school counselors have some foundational knowledge about the affective and behavioral needs of gifted students. Walker (1982) contended that "the counselor with knowledge of the

characteristics of the gifted and talented student will be invaluable service as programs and curricula are developed" (p 364). Carlson (2004) stated that school counselors who have a gifted program and/or a gifted intervention specialist in their school building are more knowledgeable about students who are gifted and therefore more likely to advocate for them. Simply put, the social, emotional, and behavioral contexts of children's lives influence their ability to learn (Santrock, 2018), and elementary school counselors should focus their efforts on collaborating with educators in schools to establish the conditions for optimal growth and development in their students identified as gifted (Howard & Solberg, 2006). Therefore, we investigated how elementary school counselors utilizing a comprehensive school counseling program described their professional experiences and practices working with gifted students.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of elementary school counselors working with gifted students within their comprehensive school counseling program. We considered two fundamental concepts when developing a research design: the nature of the research questions and the desired end product. We selected a basic qualitative study as the research design framework. A basic qualitative study research design is used when trying to uncover strategies, techniques, and practices of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

The basic qualitative inquiry format would allow participants to share openly about their professional practices as elementary school counselors working with gifted students within their comprehensive school counseling programs.

Participants and Data Collection Procedures

The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research study that also involved approval and collaboration with the Director of Special Services of the school district. First, we sent a recruitment letter through email to all elementary school counselors in one school district in the state of Ohio. The purposeful sampling criteria for selecting participants included (a) an earned master's degree in a counseling discipline and valid school counseling license in the state of Ohio with at least one year of experience as a professional school counselor; (b) self-identified alignment with the ASCA National Model within their comprehensive school counseling program; (c) employed in an elementary school that identifies and serves gifted students; and (d) work experience in the same elementary building that has a gifted intervention specialist or teacher of the gifted. Six school counselors responded and met the inclusionary self-identified as meeting the inclusionary criteria; however, one participant decided not to participate in the study. Therefore, the sample for this qualitative research was five elementary school counselors from one school district in Ohio.

Giorgi (2009) proposed that five to eight participants as an optimal number of subjects for this type of qualitative research. Based on the scope of the research, the nature of the research question, and the usefulness of the information collected through interviewing, it was believed that five would be suitable for the study. The five participants identified themselves as Caucasian ranging in age from 25 to 57 years old. The

participants ranged in professional school counseling experience from 3 to 23 years. Lastly, all participants identified as female.

Before data collection, each participant received information about the study, including a consent form to review and sign indicating their willingness to participate in this study. Participants were encouraged to ask questions before, during, and after the interviews. Data collection included a demographic questionnaire and relied on interviews as the primary source of data collection for this study. Each face-to-face interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio recorded utilizing a digital recorder. The lead author transcribed the interviews and assigned each of the participants a pseudonym to avoid any possibility of recognizing any of the participants. After the transcriptions were completed, the researcher sent the transcript via email to the participants for member checking to review for edits, accuracy and/or elaboration. After the edits were corrected on the transcription, the researcher sent back the new transcripts for the members to check their responses

Trustworthiness and Positionality

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that trustworthiness can be best described as the soundness of a research study. For a study to be deemed trustworthy, the concepts of credibility, transferability, and confirmability should be examined (Rofe, 2006). To enhance the trustworthiness of the data in this study, several verification standards were employed to enhance credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The credibility of the study was enhanced because I, the first author, knew the setting and the participants in advance, and had developed a trusting relationship. I also consulted and debriefed after the interviews with a peer who was an

assistant professor at a local university who had experience in qualitative research. The transferability of the study was demonstrated through the description of sample and participant characteristics. The confirmability was demonstrated in this study in the following ways: (1) thorough description of the researcher's positionality, (2) description of the role of researcher in relation to this study, (3) description of the role of the researcher as experienced practitioner in relation to this study, (4) a disclosure of affiliation statement, and (5) through ethical considerations.

Qualitative researchers involve themselves in every aspect of their research (Farber, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher is critical in all forms of qualitative research (Lichtman, 2010). Merriam (1998) described the qualitative researcher as "the primary instrument for data collection and analysis who relies on his or her skills to receive information in natural contexts and who uncovers its meaning by descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory procedure" (p. 345). In a basic qualitative study, the researcher has some knowledge or understanding about the topic of study that they want to be able to more fully describe from the participant's perspective (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015).

This research study bears personal meaning and stems from my, the first author's academic, professional, and personal experiences. As a tenured and licensed professional school counselor in the state of Ohio, I worked with a diverse population of students in an elementary school setting at the time that I collected data. I developed a passion for and commitment to school counselor advocacy for and with all students, particularly those who were identified as gifted and those

underachieving and unidentified gifted students. This research was conducted as part of my dissertation process, and I consulted with my dissertation chair throughout the process in order to guide through the university process. The second author has been a practitioner and faculty member for over twenty years with a diverse background to include working with a small number of gifted children in a high school setting.

Data Analysis

Our goal was to explore how professional school counselors who practice within an ASCA-model aligned school counseling framework describe their experiences and practices with students who were identified as gifted. After transcribing the five interviews, the first author coded the data, and discussed together the coded data to ultimately find themes to answer the research question through an inductive process known as thematic analysis (TA) as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that TA is best suited for explaining the specific nature of the participants' conceptualizations of the phenomenon under investigation and that it can be flexible and adaptable to many qualitative methodologies, including basic qualitative research. TA is useful for researchers conducting more practitioner or applied research approaches (Braun & Clark, 2014). The second author performed the role of a peer reviewer by providing an external check of the research process as described in (Merriam, 2009). The codes produced by the colleague peer debriefer were compared with the researcher's initial codes and differences were reviewed and discussed. Researchers identify repeated patterns of meaning by searching, coding, and interpreting the entire data set (Braun

& Clarke, 2014). Therefore, we used Braun and Clarke (2006) as a guide to conduct the following six phases of data collection and analysis: (1) review and familiarize yourself with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review generated themes; (5) define and name themes; and (6) produce the report.

Findings

The findings from this research were generated in response to the research question: How do elementary school counselors, utilizing a comprehensive school counseling program, describe their professional experiences and practices when working with gifted students? The order of themes were based on the number codes that emerged from the data. Utilizing a qualitative design, we determined that five themes were represented in the data. These themes were (1) commitment to intentional counseling practice, (2) collaborative effort, (3) knowledge through professional experience over graduate training, (4) student needs and addressing nonacademic barriers, and (5) direct service through small group counseling.

Theme 1: Commitment to Intentional Counseling Practice

The first theme that emerged with the greatest prevalence from the data involved the participant's commitment to intentional counseling practice. Abigail, Barbara, Emma, and Charlotte explained how they intentionally planned and prepared their counseling services within their comprehensive school counseling program in a variety of ways. These participants discussed their intentional counseling initiatives through the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework. Professionals in the school district, including the professional school counselors in this study, used the multi-tiered supports

and services in the Rtl framework to strategically monitor students' strengths and needs with appropriate interventions and services. Rtl is defined as an "integration of assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and reduce behavioral problems" (Center on Response to Intervention [NCRTI], 2010, p. 2). Abigail spoke specifically to the intentionality of her work with students who were gifted through a multi-tiered approach: "I have tried to be intentional and doing Tier 1 when they [students identified as gifted] are not being pulled out...so they do not miss it." Barbara explained intentionality in her counseling practice as using a variety of services to suit the different needs of the student. She explained how she purposefully teaches specific skills that may be needed to support gifted students successful functioning within the school.

Lastly, Emma used the Rtl framework, coupled with components of the ASCA National Model, when she designed and implemented school counseling interventions within her comprehensive school counseling program. She stated, "Rtl is part of ASCA. We have definitely started that."

Theme 2: Collaborative Effort

Collaboration was the second most prevalent finding and was mentioned by all participants. Participants reported working with a gifted intervention specialist at various levels ranging from little interaction to working together regularly. Despite the range in collaborative efforts, all participants expressed the importance of collaboration with other educators as an essential role of the professional school counselor. Charlotte shared: She and I have worked 4 or 5 years on this curriculum that the two of us have

developed ourselves with resources and it is very collaborative relationship. Also, when we have new students who I usually meet the new students if there is anything that I feel that she needs to be responsive to or if they mention they were in a program similar to that in their old school that she is very easy to collaborate with.

Theme 3: Knowledge Through Professional Experience

The third theme was the role of training in the profession as opposed to preparation in counselor education. None of the participants in this study had any coursework or informational trainings within their graduate school counseling program about the gifted population. However, Barbara noted, "I did have a college class [in undergraduate school] called "The Exceptional Child," and that is where I connected with the professor of that class about gifted students." Abigail and Barbara described a training regarding working with gifted students they both participated. Barbara stated, "I participated in a training that described the unique characteristics of gifted students. I found that extremely beneficial for my counseling work with my students." All five participants described their knowledge of the gifted population and the students' distinct needs, which they learned from direct professional experiences on the job.

Theme 4: Student Needs and Nonacademic Barriers

All participants shared a wide variety of student needs and non-academic barriers to learning that they witnessed among their gifted students, as well as, their experience addressing those needs. Non-academic barriers to learning are conditions that negatively impact a students' ability to learn such as social and emotional factors or cultural concerns (Muñoz, Owens, &

Bartlett, 2015). The participants reported that gifted youth experience skewed self-concept, lack of empathy, poor rapport-building skills, poor peer relationships, and anxiety and stress as barriers to their learning. Four out of the five participants implemented some type of counseling services to improve behavior and enhance social and emotional competence based on the unique needs of their students. Barbara stated: "...6th grade girls...have a tougher time fitting in more than the average student because they do not have the same sense of belonging because they don't think people understand them as much. I think it is harder for them to connect.

Theme 5: Direct Service Through Small Group Counseling

The participants discussed the benefits of small group counseling for all students, including those students who are identified as gifted. Four participants discussed how they implement small groups and the topics that they discussed. Participants reported that small groups were beneficial because it gives a sense of universality and cohesiveness amongst members Charlotte stated:

Ok, in the small group classroom guidance – I call that both because they are a pull out-group – but then I teach it as lessons with the gifted teacher. Um, kids are identified here in 4th grade during 4th, 5th, and 6th grade she and I co-teach lessons specifically designed for those identified as gifted. We do a total of 6-9 lessons every year for 4, 5, and 6th grade. So, some of the lessons include bullying, perfectionism, future planning, trash and treasure habits, developing habits worth hiring, some career learning specific for them.

In sum, we identified five themes in

the participants' explanations of their experiences providing counseling services within an ASCA framework to youth who are identified as gifted. These themes were (1) a commitment to intentional counseling practice, (2) collaborative effort, (3) knowledge through professional experience, (4) student needs and nonacademic barriers, and (5) direct service through small group counseling.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer an examination of five elementary school counselors' professional experiences and practices working with students who are gifted within their comprehensive school counseling program. Among the elementary counselors who participated, all of them utilized the ASCA National Model as a framework through which individualization and differentiation of student and counselor interaction could be maximized. The ASCA National Model provides a framework for intentional practice.

The participants in this study were already implementing comprehensive school counseling programs which allowed them to regularly engage in accountability practices. They reported that the ASCA National Model provided a framework through which they could be intentional in their practice. The participants described using a multitiered system to differentiate their counseling services to their gifted students within the Rtl framework. Professional school counselors' use of the Rtl framework within their comprehensive school counseling has been described in the literature (Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012) along with how to use Rtl in partnership with other professionals school psychologists, gifted intervention specialists and the like (Zambrano, Castro-

Villareal, & Sullivan, 2012).

These elementary counselors described their collaborative work with teachers of the gifted. Gifted students would benefit from a professional school counselor who is leading a comprehensive school counseling program to collaborate with the gifted intervention specialist in order to address students' needs as a team. Collaboration among the school counselor and gifted specialist has been present in the literature for some time (i.e., Wiener, 1968) and among current researchers (ASCA, 2012; NAGC, n.d.; VanTassel-Baska, 1990; Wood, 2012). Wood (2012) argued, "By working together, school counselors and gifted educators could find themselves in a powerful partnership, a deep professional relationship, and as persuasive advocates in the service to gifted students and their families" (p. 273).

An increasing demand facing professional school counselors today is their ability to effectively meet the personal/social, academic, and career needs of diverse populations within their school (DeKruyf et al., 2013). Despite the school counselor scholars citing the unique nature of and specific counseling needs of diverse populations (e.g., Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnston, 2018; Levy & Plucker, 2008; Studer, 2015), many professional school counselors are not required to take specialized courses pertaining to the gifted population in order to enhance their knowledge and clinical skills (Peterson, 2006). Upon completion of their master's programs, many professional school counselors feel inadequately trained to effectively address the unique and diverse needs of gifted students (Peterson, 2006). These participants developed their knowledge and skills in supporting gifted students through their own professional

practice.

The findings of the current study align with existing literature regarding the benefits of incorporating classroom guidance responsive services, including group counseling, for serving gifted students. Peterson (2013) found that school counselors working with high-potential children from low-income families described group work as particularly powerful when working with the gifted population. Similarly, participants in this study reported an increase in sense of universality and cohesiveness.

Implications

This study highlights five themes aligning with previous literature. These themes represent areas of potential focus for school counselors working with gifted children. The demands being placed on school counselors have been increasing and this study represents a small step in the direction of further recognizing those needs. A larger sample size, more geographical variability, and diversity should be addressed by future studies.

School Counseling Students

School counseling students would benefit from increasing their foundational knowledge in characteristics, developmental trajectories, and identification processes of/for gifted students. Based on the participants' experiences in this study, reading professional journals on the various topics related to gifted students, working with this population during practicum and internship, and familiarizing oneself in asynchronous development all appear to help enhance the awareness and the professional practices for working with this population. Seeking mentoring from practitioners and scholars within the field of gifted education

would also be recommended.

Elementary School Counselors

The available information for school counselors is mostly conceptual in nature from gifted education, describing best practices professional school counselors use when working with gifted students (Wood, 2018). Within a differentiated counseling approach, the elementary school counselor may want to examine the ecological considerations of the students' person-environmental interactions as having significance in developing psychological traits conducive to talent development. Utilizing an ecological framework as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) would help systematically organize the multiple levels of influence on the students' talent development (i.e. parent-gifted student, teacher-gifted student, peers-gifted student, community-gifted student, educational policy-gifted student). Additionally, an ecological approach to counseling as described Conyne and Cook (2004) would aid in formulating a thorough case/student conceptualization and assist in designing effective, differentiated interventions while simultaneously recognizing the people, places, and things that directly or indirectly enhance or limit the student.

Limitations

There are limitations of this study that warrant attention including sample size, lack of diversity in the sample, a limited geographic area, and focus on elementary school counselors. First, while small number of participants aided the researcher in investigating the research problem in a contextualized, qualitative approach, such as in a basic qualitative study, this small sample size of five practitioners are not representative of the general population of school counselors..

This study was designed as a descriptive study examining perceptions of school counselors in one school district, and we caution against drawing inferences from experiences of these five participants. The third limitation is the sampling strategy and strict inclusion criteria, which reduced the pool of possible participants to six elementary school counselors. Future research should aim for a larger and more culturally diverse sample to include middle and high school counselors from a larger geographic region. In sum, there is a lack of transferability of the study findings.

Future Research

We investigated the experiences of elementary school counselors who were working with gifted students. This study of five elementary school counselors raised several questions appropriate for further research. Though this study was exploratory, efforts should be made to identify and explore experiences of more school counselors who are implementing an ASCA-aligned comprehensive school counseling program and who are providing counseling services to elementary-aged gifted students. We also recommend providing and assessing the effectiveness of counseling services tailored to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of gifted students in an elementary school setting. We recommend that future researcher investigate middle and high school counselors' experiences, solicit a more diverse sample of school counselors, and seek experiences of school counselors in other geographic areas of the county.

Conclusion

This study provided a description and a deeper understanding of the experiences and practices of five elementary school counselors in one district as they provided counseling services with their gifted

students within their comprehensive school counseling program. We intended to help close the gap that exists in the literature about school counseling services for gifted youth. We explored elementary school counselors' work with students whom were identified as gifted with the intention to inform counseling practice for the betterment of a subgroup of students. Utilizing a qualitative design, we identified five themes in these data. Themes pertained to providing counseling services in collaboration with other professional, gaining knowledge of giftedness as a professional, specific needs of gifted youth, and group counseling as an intervention. These findings align with previously published research.

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