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Abstract

In this transcendental phenomenological study and related data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), authors explored school counselor educators' perceptions regarding recent changes in the profession. Through six focus groups, participants (n = 29) shared their experience, resulting in four themes: (a) range of reactions to changes in the field; (b) school counseling is less valued in the counseling profession; (c) inconsistent school counselor educator identity; (d) ardent advocacy. Authors discuss implications for school counselor preparation, identity, policy, and advocacy within an ecological framework and the need for additional national and international research.

Keywords: counselor education, school counseling, school counseling policy, counselor identity, phenomenological design

From an ecological perspective, the evolution and priorities of a profession can be best understood through the examination of intersecting factors or subsystems ranging from micro- to macro-levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; McMahon et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2020). For example, since its inception, the field of school counseling in the United States, which includes preservice preparation and Kindergarten to 12th grade school counseling practice, has been influenced by and impacted a number of such subsystems: societal changes, professional organizations, and professional leaders, such as school counselor educators (SCEs). These subsystems range from macro level (e.g., societal changes) to exosystem level (e.g., professional organizations) to microsystem influences (e.g., preparation programs; Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018). Recent changes in these subsystems, including a new relationship between national organizations, an updated national model (i.e., a systemic framework for school counselors' work; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019), and a new recognition for school counseling preparation programs, have the potential to impact policy, preparation and subsequent school counseling practice. Within this perspective, SCEs serve as educational leaders (Havlik et al., 2019; McMahon et al., 2009) as they provide teaching, supervision, and professional orientation to preservice school counselors; deliver professional development and consultation to practicing school counselors; conduct research; and are active leaders in professional counseling organizations (ASCA, 2014; Warren et al., 2020). As such, in this study we conducted a phenomenological investigation to understand SCEs' (N = 29) experiences and perceptions regarding recent changes in the counseling field in the United States.

Ecological Influences on School Counseling

Due to the systemic nature of the field, the school counseling profession can be best understood using a historical and ecological lens. In the last century, the profession has been shaped by multiple subsystems including societal changes, professional organizations, and professional leaders. First, the profession has been responsive to societal and educational priorities, thereby focusing on a range of professional efforts: vocational guidance, mental health, accountability, postsecondary planning (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012) and most recently social justice advocacy, and antiracist school counseling (Song et al., 2020).

Next, professional organizations have guided the practice of the profession as a whole and individuals in the field, all while influencing policy at the national and international levels. For instance, the International School Counselor Association (ISCA) is dedicated to the needs of international school counselors working in international schools with the goal of benefiting student success on a global level (ISCA, n.d.). In the United States, the ASCA, the flagship national school counseling organization has clarified school counselor roles through a host of contributions: a school counseling journal, professional standards and competencies, and the promotion of comprehensive school counseling programs, including the ASCA National Model (2019). Similarly, the American Counseling Association (ACA) is the largest counseling association currently housing 19 divisions encompassing counseling specialty areas, including the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), which addresses clinical mental health and school counselors' preservice preparation, as well as issues (e.g., supervision of practicing counselors, research) important to counselor educators (ACA, n.d.-a).

The ACA and ASCA continue to influence the profession in part by defining the counselor role. In 2005, the ACA divisions worked over several years to create a common definition of counseling in the United States: "a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (Kaplan et al., 2014, p. 368). While most national organizations endorsed the definition, ASCA did not as they disagreed on a single counseling identity and suggested the possibility of "several counseling professions" (H. E. Sparks, personal communication, February 6. 2009, as cited in Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). According to ASCA, in the United States "school counselors practice counseling and are well-versed in mental health issues; however, they work in an education profession rather than a counseling profession with differences much deeper than the work setting," defining "school counselors' role as educators" (Hickman, 2018, para. 10).

More recently, ACA and ASCA created a new collaborative relationship. Historically, ASCA was a division of the ACA (Gysbers, 2010); however according to Richard Wong, former executive director of ASCA, since the mid-1990s, ASCA has operated as an autonomous, independent organization while maintaining status as an ACA division (Wong, personal communications, March 27, 2018). In 2018, ACA and ASCA changed the organizational structure created 65 years prior (ACA, 2018). This new organizational structure has the potential to impact other subsystems, including training preparation and policy within the profession.

Equally important professional organizations include accrediting bodies, which guide policy and preparation. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is the primary organization accrediting master's and doctoral programs across counseling specialty areas (CACREP, 2015) in the United States. The most recent 2016 CACREP standards emphasize counseling as a universal program with a shift in graduation requirements from 48 to 60 credits for school counselor preparation programs focusing on school counselor foundations, contextual dimensions, and practice. Relatedly, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) accredits teacher education programs and provides content-specific standards and recognition though Specialized Professional Associations (SPAs), including school administration, school psychology, and special education (CAEP, n.d.). In 2019, ASCA offered the SPA recognition to preparation programs. They review school counseling graduate programs and determine national recognition based on ASCA SPA standards, emphasizing school counselors' roles as educators, while also valuing mental health services for students (ASCA, 2021).

The recent changes in the field impact school counselor training programs and the counselor educators charged with leading the training programs. According to the ASCA (2014) ethical standards, SCEs must be knowledgeable on school counseling program models, standards, and competencies; current trends; and professional organizations. Situated amidst the professional organizations and accrediting bodies, SCEs determine training foci and approaches, including whether preparation programs opt for CACREP accreditation, and/or CAEP: ASCA SPA recognition.

Rationale and Purpose

From an ecological lens, changes in professional subsystems, such as changes in professional organizations (e.g., the new ACA/ASCA relationship) and preparation program recognition (e.g., ASCA SPA) may impact SCEs and related subsystems, such as policy, advocacy, and even professional identity. Currently, there is a lack of empirical research examining SCE's reactions to recent changes in the profession. SCE's perspectives are crucial, as many of the recent changes impact the school counseling specialty specifically. In addition, gaining insight on SCEs' perceptions of professional trends may inform school counselor preparation, practice, and priorities. As a result, the following research question guided the study: What are school counselor educators' experiences regarding recent changes within the school counseling profession?

Method

We conducted an exploratory, phenomenological investigation of SCEs lived experiences with recent changes in the school counseling profession. Phenomenological research is often used to describe the essence of the lived experiences of a phenomenon, according to one sample of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). We aimed to capture the what and how of the given phenomenon particular to a sample of SCEs, utilizing Creswell and Poth's (2018) steps to a phenomenological study, derived from Moustakas' (1994) transcendental approach. Thus, the goal of this phenomenological investigation is not generalizability to all SCEs, but rather to gain a rich, in-depth perspective of the given sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reflexivity Statement

The first researcher is an associate professor in counselor education. She holds two master's degrees, one in school counseling and another in educational psychology as well as a doctorate in educational psychology with a subspecialty in counseling psychology; her graduate education was completed in the United States. She was an elementary school counselor for 10 years and served on the state school counselor organization board of directors. She identifies as a White, cisgender female of European descent. The second researcher is an associate professor in counselor education specializing in school counseling. She completed both a doctoral and a master's degree in counselor education and supervision and is influenced by her experiences as an elementary school counselor, and leader in school counseling professional organizations.; her graduate education was completed in the United States. She self-

identifies as a White, cisgender female of European descent. The third researcher is an assistant professor in counselor education. She identifies as a Black female of African, specifically Nigerian, descent. She has a bachelor's in guidance and counselling, a master's in psychology and education for special needs, a post-master's in school counseling, and a doctorate in counselor education and supervision; her graduate education was completed in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States. She is influenced by her experience counseling K-12 students and working in British schools for over 10 years as a school social worker. All three authors are professional members of ASCA, ACA, and ACES, and they all presently work in the United States.

Corresponding with a phenomenological approach, we prescribe to a social constructivist perspective, inquiring as to how participants construct knowledge, and we believe reality is largely contextual, varied, and subjective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). In regard to ontology, we believe humans' perceptions of reality are subjective, with the absence of one universal truth. We prescribe to the epistemological perspective that knowledge is unlimited and is created through the research process and the researcher-participant relationship. Pertaining to axiology, we contend individuals' reality is influenced by their values and assumptions, and as such, engaged in bracketing through reflexive journaling, and extensive research team conversations, described in the trustworthiness section.

Participants

We developed a purposeful sample of participants (n = 29) who had experiences with the phenomenon under investigation and met the inclusion criteria (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). To participate, participants had to be employed as SCEs, specializing in school counseling, at the time of data collection. Specializing in school counseling was operationalized by self-identification and meeting two of the following within the last three years: (a) teaching school counseling specific graduate courses; (b) holding membership in school counseling professional associations at the regional, state, or national level; (c) engaging in school counseling research (e.g., conducting, writing, and publishing research pertaining to school counseling); and/or (d) engaging in school counseling professional service/leadership (e.g., may include elected or appointed positions for a school counseling professional organization, program or department, or conference).

Participants identified as women (76%; *n* = 22) and men (24%; *n* = 7); White/European American (93%; *n* = 27), American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander and White (3%; *n* = 1), and not specified (3%; *n* = 1). The mean age of participants was 44.6 years (range: 30-67 years; *SD* = 12.07), and participants represented 22 states across the United States. Participants' academic ranks included assistant professors (66%; *n* = 19), associate professors (14%; *n* = 4), professors (17%; *n* = 5), and clinical faculty (3%; *n* = 1). In addition, participants relayed holding the following positions: program directors/coordinators (21%; *n* = 6) and chair (3%; *n* = 1); they had a mean of 8.64 years of experience in academia (range: 1-37 years; *SD* = 9.53). Participants were members in professional organizations, most frequently ACA (97%; *n* = 28), ASCA (97%; *n* = 28), State Counseling Association: (97%; *n* = 28), and ACES (83%; *n* = 24). The majority reported their programs were CACREP accredited (86%; *n* = 25) or seeking CACREP accreditation (7%; *n* = 2), while others were not accredited (7%; *n* = 2).

Data Collection and Analysis

Before data collection, the study was granted human subjects review committee approval. This is a rigorous scholarly process of scrutiny required in North American universities to conduct investigations. We marketed the study through targeted announcements on social media, via email, and at professional meetings. Social media and email outlets included CESNET (an international listserv for counselor educators), a school counselor education Facebook group, the ASCA Scene (professional newsletter) for SCEs, ACA Connect specific to school counselors and Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling (ACAC) members. Also, we made announcements at professional meetings for the ACES school counseling interest network. We purposefully marketed to members in multiple professional associations (ACA, ASCA, ACES). Individuals interested in participating completed an online survey which included questions on availability, demographics, and inclusion criteria. In alignment with Patton's (2015) recommendations on focus group size and interview length, we conducted six, one-hour focus groups (n = 29; focus groups *n* = 3, 4, 5, 5, 5, 7), utilizing WebEx, an online video conferencing platform. Participants were placed in focus groups based on their availability. The first researcher led each focus group; the second and third researcher alternated attendance. Focus groups were used to capture a range of viewpoints, and to promote engaged interaction between participants (Kvale, 2007). Further, we used semi-structured interview questions, as is commonly found in phenomenological investigations (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018) and aligned with a social constructivist perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, we started the interview by saying: *We have had several developments in the last year in the school counseling profession. During this focus group, we would like to hear about your reactions to these changes. Who would like to begin?* Consistent with a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as participants responded, we reflected content and meaning, and asked probing questions, based on participant answers. Thus, common in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth), we asked broad, overarching interview questions related to the research topic, and then asked semi-structured follow-up probing questions individualized to participants' responses. As such, the follow-up reflections and questions varied by focus group. Last, interviews were recorded then transcribed by a secure transcription service.

For data analysis, we used Creswell and Poth's (2018) steps to a phenomenological study, based on Moustakas' (1994) transcendental approach. First, to become familiar with the data, we individually read through all transcripts several times and discussed our reactions and biases, as well as strategies to bracket or set aside our experiences, in an effort to highlight participants' experiences. Reading the transcripts multiple times was particularly important given the volume of data we secured through six focus groups with 29 participants. Second, we conducted systematic data analysis, starting with narrow then moving to broader units of analysis. For instance, the first researcher reviewed and horizonalized the first transcript, highlighting statements of meaning. Then the second researcher provided consensus coding and reviewed the coded transcript for agreement and disagreement. The third researcher reviewed each transcript consensus coded by the first two authors and provided feedback. Thus, we engaged in intercoder agreement, meeting to discuss and reach consensus on all discrepant horizons, then put all horizons into a codebook. This data analysis process was repeated for every transcript, with the first and second researcher alternating roles as lead coder. Third, when horizonalization was complete, we independently reviewed the codebook and organized the horizons into clusters (i.e., themes and subthemes). Next, we met to compare themes, subthemes, and corresponding horizons, until reaching full consensus. Last, the first researcher used the codebook to write the overall essence of *what* and *how* participants experienced the phenomenon (i.e., textural and structural descriptions), which was reviewed and modified by the second and third researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas,1994).

Establishing Trustworthiness

We used trustworthiness strategies aligned with the phenomenological approach, and frequently used in counseling-specific phenomenological investigations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). First, to prioritize participants' perspectives and minimize our biases and assumptions, we engaged in bracketing through reflexive journaling and discussions during research meetings. Second, we engaged in triangulation, for confirmability. We conducted researcher triangulation, or intercoder agreement by reviewing and reaching consensus on all data analysis (e.g., all horizons, codes, etc.). Also, we triangulated, or analyzed data across focus groups. Third, we conducted member checking in several phases of the study: during interviews (e.g., reflecting and confirming participants' meaning); requesting feedback and confirming the accuracy of participants' interview transcripts; and soliciting participant feedback and confirmation of accuracy regarding the results of the study (e.g., we sent all participants the results via email). All participants engaged in the member checking of transcripts and a summary of the results. First, overall, participants agreed with the transcripts, providing minimal feedback. Participants did suggest minor changes in spelling and asked for assurance of anonymity. Second, we provided participants a summary of the results and similar to the transcripts, suggestions were minimal. One participant suggested greater clarification on a theme and two other participants asked for greater focus on the impact of accreditation, which we did. Finally, multiple participants expressed that the results captured their experiences and may be helpful for later advocacy.

Fourth, we utilized an external auditor, an associate professor in counselor education with training and experience publishing school counseling-specific qualitative research. They provided feedback (e.g., confirmability and rival explanations) after reviewing our audit trail, field notes, coded transcripts, codebook, and drafted method and results. Based on their feedback, we modified names of some subthemes and codes to be more specific and added a subtheme. Fifth, we included negative case analyses, or counternarratives in the results as appropriate, to elucidate varied participant perspectives, in addition to the given themes and subthemes. Last, we described our background and positionality through a reflexivity statement, and also a thick, rich description of the method and results, for transferability and replication.

Table 1
Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Range of Reactions to Changes in the Field	
School Counseling is Less Valued in the Counseling Profession	1. Professional Legitimacy 2. School Counseling is Less Prioritized in the Counseling Preparation Programs 3. School Counseling Faculty are in the Minority
Inconsistent School Counselor Educator Identity	1. Conjoined Identity 2. Educator First Identity 3. Counselor First Identity 4. Identity Confusion
Ardent Advocacy	

Results

We identified four themes related to SCEs' experiences with recent changes in the profession: (a) range of reactions to changes in the field; (b) school counseling is less valued in the counseling profession; (c) inconsistent school counselor educator identity; (d) ardent advocacy (see Table 1). These themes contextualize the experiences and voices across participants. Next, we present each theme and when applicable, associated subthemes and counternarratives.

Theme 1: Range of Reactions to Changes in the Field

Participants expressed a range of reactions to recent changes in the school counseling profession including a continuum of feelings. Specifically, participants' reactions to changes in the field often focused on the formal separation between ACA and ASCA. Although some participants conveyed feeling hopeful or positive, others were negative or concerned about the new relationship. On one hand, one participant said, "we are powerful enough in numbers as far as school counselors…We can stand on our two feet… this change [will] be okay. There's going to be ripple effects... and I think we'll be fine" (focus group [FG] 6). A different participant in FG 6 shared "I really do believe that we are making strides in the [right] direction." Yet another stated, "I actually felt liberated [about the changes]… this is all about focus, it's time." (FG 4). Finally, one participant said, "for me, the [new relationship] has been a good thing because I'm hoping we will find our voice, and our platform that no longer hinges upon the preferences of another field" (FG 5).

In contrast, other participants expressed worry and loss related to the formal separation between the two professional organizations (i.e., ASCA and ACA). One participant noted, "so there's a loss and a sadness, and maybe that's what we need as a profession… to mourn what's been, to birth what's going to be" (FG 2). Similarly, participants reported feeling concerned, with one participant stating, "overall [I have] feelings of being unsettled and fearful in that whole process" (FG 3). One participant noted, "I really worry. I hope that we would push and pull together, this profession. But I also very much worry that we're going to push and pull and separate…I worry that we're going to fragment our profession" (FG 1). Finally, one participant shared, "this has been a continual struggle for me in trying to pick a side in terms of ASCA vs. ACA" (FG 4). To that end, some participants perceived that school counseling lacked an *organizational home*.

To present a less commonly expressed counternarrative, some participants were not surprised by the changes. One participant stated, "I can tell you that the disaffiliation was not a surprise, as someone who has been involved with both organizations for many years" (FG 4) and "[when I heard the news about the new relationship] I remember stopping what I was doing and being very confused…why are they even announcing this? They [the organizations] haven't done the same thing for a long [time]…I feel like they've been split" (FG 2).

Theme 2: School Counseling is Less Valued in the Counseling Profession

Participants in this study identified that school counseling may not be valued or influential within the greater counseling profession, compared to clinical mental health counseling, and in light of recent changes. Within this theme, we noted the following subthemes: (a) professional legitimacy; (b) school counseling is less prioritized in counseling preparation programs; (c) school counselor education faculty are in the minority.

Professional Legitimacy. Many participants shared concerns about the impact of recent changes on the legitimacy of the school counseling profession. Some participants predicted less legitimacy and fragmentation, while others suggested more legitimacy and cohesion. On one hand, participants expressed concern that changes, such as the new relationship between ACA and ASCA, and the ASCA SPA recognition may lead to professional fragmentation, "all of this separating, and identity, and recognitions. I'm really worried about what that's going to do for us and our legitimacy as mental health professionals. Are we going to lose something one way or the other?" (FG 3). In addition, a participant discussed, "I guess my biggest concern is… [will] this new [CAEP/ASCA] accreditation option weaken the school counseling profession?" (FG 1). A participant suggested that recent changes were particularly salient given current societal needs:

> …within broader society in America, we're finally arriving at a point in time and in a socio-political context where there is a heightened awareness of the need for mental health services. And we're making some strides in stigma reduction and recognizing the need--especially among school-aged youth--to have mental health support. And if this [separation] somehow changes that and reduces school counselors' ability to advocate professionally for their skills and abilities as mental health professionals, then I'm concerned that that's potentially a missed opportunity (FG 3).

On the other hand, some participants felt hopeful that the changes in the field might lead to opportunities for increased legitimacy and strengthening of the school counseling profession. For example, one participant shared, "counselors are in leadership positions and they bring to those positions very valuable skills... The goals have always been to help students succeed. We are now doing that better than ever because of the [recent] changes" (FG 4). Similarly,

> "I don't think school counselors are sitting at the education table enough… we need school counselors at… every state Department of Education… if we're not… then we're not included in the conversation about education and student mental health. And that's where, again, I feel hopeful [about the profession's potential for legitimacy]" (FG 5).

School Counseling is Less Prioritized in the Counseling Preparation Programs

Participants were concerned about their lack of influence within counselor training programs. One participant shared, "school counseling in practice, in programs, becomes collateral to mental health counseling, mental health culture" (FG 6). Another relayed, "most classes are taught by people who have clinical mental health backgrounds or maybe spent some time in school but not as a school counselor. We really need more school counselor educators with actual school counseling experience" (FG 6). A final participant reiterated "I've been working hard to advocate that some of the courses we teach [that are] cross-listed with mental health [courses] not be cross-listed [any longer]... when we cross list courses, we often teach to the least common denominator [clinical mental health]" (FG 4).

Some participants felt this marginalization also extended to the impact of accreditation on preparation programs, as one participant noted, "I think that the CACREP standards privilege mental health. I don't think they do a great job of preparing school counselors for the complicated world of working in schools" (FG 2). This was echoed by another participant who stated, "I still don't feel like we have anybody [accrediting bodies] that serves us" (FG 1).

School Counseling Faculty are in the Minority

Related to the preparation, participants believed they were perceived as having less influence as school counseling-focused faculty. For example, one participant stated, "I think sometimes my school counseling students feel like they're the minority or the other compared to the mental health students and I think it's really more that as a school counselor educator, I'm the minority" (FG 4). A different participant in FG 4 shared, "many of us have been... isolated in a [preparation] program that is more clinical mental health faculty and then one or two school counselor educators." Another stated "I feel pretty alone in a counselor education world" (FG 2).

Theme 3: Inconsistent School Counselor Educator Identity

For many participants, the changes in the field led to questions about their professional identity, as evidenced by the following subthemes: (a) conjoined identity; (b) educator first identity; (c) counselor first identity; (d) identity confusion.

Conjoined Identity. Some participants viewed their professional identity as a connected framework comprised of both education and counseling, "I see myself… supporting more of a conjoined identity, where we're both counselors and educators in equal measure." (FG 2). Yet another stated, "I still remember my professor telling us, 'you're both counselors and educators.' And that really solidified my identity as both, and I tell my students that now." (FG 1). These beliefs translated into practice, with another participant stating, "I am teaching students in both [counseling and education], and I want to have an understanding of all of what counseling looks like in different spaces" (FG 4).

Educator First Identity. Other participants described an educator first identity, "I see my role in the schools as an educator" (FG 2). Another described the advantages to positioning themselves in education,

> Through communicating leadership, looking at trends, looking at research, [I] realized that we had one foot in mental health and one foot in education. We were falling in the river by doing that. We had to put both feet somewhere and landed in education (FG 4).

Still others noted that recent professional changes may lead to an identity steeped in education, "in my heart, in the next five years, I'm going to see school counseling shifting more and more away from a clinical aspect and more and more into an educational world" (FG 1).

Counselor First Identity. In contrast, other participants focused on a counselor first identity, such as, "I want to advocate for us to... maintain our alignment with mental health programs, and to maintain our identity as counselors... mental health counselors with a school specialty" (FG 3). Similarly, participant in FG 4 noted, "I believe in the ASCA model, yet I also strongly identify as a counselor first and want to advocate for clinical training for school counselors."

Identity Confusion. Multiple participants reported confusion about the changes in the profession and the subsequent impact on professional identity; one participant shared, "we're kind of stuck… we're not mental health experts...and we're not educators. What are we then? We're in this weird middle ground" (FG 5). Yet another participant stated that this new relationship, or a separation between school counseling and counseling "would make me wonder, what am I?" (FG 2). This confusion led some to question the field overall, "I'm in a mixed place [in terms of identity] and it makes me wonder, how is this going to shape our profession? What is our role as school counselor educators in that…?" (FG 6)

Theme 4: Ardent Advocacy

The final theme was one of enthusiasm and advocacy. As participants discussed recent changes in the profession, they described their commitment as ardent advocates for the field and for training students. This passion was demonstrated by the following participant,

> It's rare to find a school counselor educator who doesn't love school counseling. We're all so passionate about this profession and this field. And so that heightens those negative emotions even more, like not only does this [the professional changes] have potential negative

> implications for the profession. But, it's a profession we love (FG 1).

Within the focus of advocacy, SCEs questioned how to support advocacy, in the current climate:

> We love our field. We're passionate about the field. We want to protect our field and move it forward. But if we're not really listening to each other, how can we do that? We need a unified voice…a unified mission that's clear (FG 5).

Also, participants discussed the ASCA Model as a means of professional advocacy, "the ASCA framework, the model for school counselors and school counseling programs [has] given us a common language for school counselors…it's helped with professional identity... and has become quite an advocacy tool" (FG 4). Participants' advocacy was also driven by the potential to impact students at the graduate and K-12 levels, "we need to … have [faculty] in front of students who want to advocate for the profession. So then we can continue to disseminate that information through our students. And ultimately, to impact the students K-12 that we're serving" (FG 4). One participant noted the important role SCEs play by focusing on teaching preservice school counselors to be future advocates,

> Counselor educators make sure that our students leave our [preparation] programs with a sense of who they are and what they can do with their professional identity, and the ability to promote it and to advocate. I hope that with the split and the emphasis of professional identity, that can happen… the ability to advocate for one's expertise (FG 6).

Finally, a different participant in FG 6 shared, "after hearing [about] the advocacy efforts that you're doing, I have this recognition...we [SCEs] are such a resilient bunch and we have worked really hard to advocate for our profession and then pass that on to our students."

Discussion

In examining SCEs' experiences, we noted a variety of responses to recent changes in the field, as well a shared passion for the profession. Specifically, in response to the new relationship between ACA and ASCA, participants shared a range of robust reactions, including optimism, frustration, concern, and anticipation. Whereas these reported changes and the related reactions are empirically novel within the counseling profession, they parallel organizational shifts and member reactions that have occurred in other professions. For example, individuals in the library science profession have struggled to solidify and present as a united identity, due largely to the potential division into two professional subgroups (library and information science). Professionals within this field have expressed regret, fear, and frustration at the inability of their profession to overcome fragmentation (Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018). Hence, SCEs' range of reactions reported in the present study may be typical in the context of substantial professional changes.

Furthermore, applying an ecological perspective highlights the relationship between recent changes in subsystems of the school counseling field. First, at a macrolevel, when discussing changes in the field, participants expressed that the school counseling specialty is less prioritized within the overarching counseling field. In particular, counseling subsystems including professional organizations, accreditation standards and preparation programs typically focus on the clinical mental health specialty as the default, leaving school counseling in the minority. These findings expand upon similar studies, in which SCEs reported that non-school counseling faculty typically prioritized clinical mental health topics within their counselor education coursework (Watkinson et al., 2018). At the exosystem level, participants in this study reacted to the potential impact multiple accreditation options may have on preparation programs. Specifically, some individuals questioned whether the advent of two different accreditation or recognition options might divide the field, with some preparation programs focusing on ASCA SPA standards and others on CACREP standards. These questions align with recent research that note the impact of accreditation on a profession's quality and strength (Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018) and again reflect similar changes in other fields. For example, accrediting bodies have been noted to strengthen preparation in fields including Audiology/Speech-Language Pathology, Library Science, and Teaching (Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018). From a policy perspective this is critical, as there is a need for consistent competencies within preparation programs that "target advocacy, leadership and implementation of programs" (Warren et al., 2020, p. 75).

Additionally, SCEs discussed the potential impact of changes in the field on the microlevel of professional identity. Some believed these recent changes symbolized school counseling prioritizing an "education first" identity while others were concerned about professional fragmentation and identity confusion, preferring a counseling-focused identity. Still others supported a conjoined counselor and educator identity. These findings reflect the literature, noting the school counseling profession's on-going journey toward professional identity definition (Cinotti, 2014; Lambie et al., 2019). Specifically, scholars have situated school counseling within the counseling field (ACA, n.d.-b), noting direct counseling as the least diffused and most unique role school counselors provide in schools (Astramovich et al., 2013). Others have highlighted school counselors' important role in students' academic development (College Board, 2011), while others suggest a conjoined identity, noting the importance of school counselors meeting the increased mental health needs of some students, while also serving all students (DeKruyf et al., 2013; Gruman et al., 2013; Lambie et al., 2019).

Finally, SCEs in this study communicated passion and advocacy regarding their work that transcended throughout subsystems. Advocacy united rather than divided participants, regardless of their reactions to professional

changes or professional identity. Similarly, advocacy is a theme prioritized throughout the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2019; Education Trust, 1997), with SCEs' advocacy playing a critical role in shaping the profession (McMahon, et al., 2009). In this present study, SCEs communicated hope for a unified professional voice that strengthens the work of K-12 school counselors and stand ready to advocate for the profession.

Limitations

The current study should be considered within the context of the limitations. First, given the interactive nature of focus groups and the lack of anonymity, participants' responses could have been influenced by social desirability as well as willingness to participate, especially given the power differential within focus groups. This power differential may be particularly salient for individuals who have historically had less power and privilege in U.S. systems, such as people of color, pre-tenured and non-tenured positions. We countered these limitations by sending transcripts and the findings to each participant for individual member checking. Second, we were limited by a lack of ethnic/racial diversity in our sample, which impacts the findings. To elaborate, we had several SCEs from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds who signed up to participate in focus groups and then later withdrew (n = 12), often citing scheduling conflicts.

Implications for Policy, Evaluation and Future Research

The SCEs in the present study discussed a range of reactions resulting from the recent changes in the school counseling profession, underscoring that the present time is one of professional transition. This transition provides a unique opportunity to shape the future of school counseling by working within the ecological subsystems in the profession. In response to this professional transition, we provide several suggestions, rooted in the findings of this study.

SCEs' reported concerns about the influence of the many different professional organizations including CACREP, CAEP, ASCA and ACES on practice and policy. Similarly, "as the agents of a discipline, professional associations are the institutions wherein power is gained or lost, and where the evolution of a professional group can be best orchestrated" (Leahy et al., 2011, p. 2). Thus, SCEs indicated a variety of responses to the CACREP program accreditation and the burgeoning ASCA SPA recognition. Research has noted that multiple accreditation bodies may threaten public perception of professional unity (Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018) and impact how and whether preparation programs adopt uniform practices and guidelines (Warren et al., 2020).

Given the interconnection between consistent school counselor preparation, policy advances, professional identity, and positive outcomes for all K-12 students (Warren et al., 2020), we recommend professional organizations highlight the overlap between CACREP accreditation and the ASCA SPA, providing resources for SCEs interested in pursuing both simultaneously. In addition, CACREP, CAEP, and ASCA could create a crosswalk of overlapping content between CACREP accreditation and ASCA SPA recognition to evaluate efforts and create a joint statement related to the key areas of preparation of K-12 school counselors. In addition, we suggest organizations provide education sessions to increase awareness and combat misinformation (e.g., the ASCA SPA has been misperceived as an accreditation, rather than a program recognition) to reduce questions related to program evaluation.

Relatedly, SCEs reported a desire for but lack of an *organizational home* in which they are prioritized. We suggest SCEs can use their leadership roles in organizations to advocate for such a home, starting with a joint interest network across organizations. This interest network could include ACES and ASCA members, and members of CACREP board, providing an *organizational home* rooted in multiple perspectives. This network could provide guidance on policy, preparation and evaluation which spans across different professional organizations' ideologies.

Finally, the SCEs expressed differing preferences for professional identity—both their own identities and the identity within the profession: should the school counseling profession value education first, counseling first, or have a conjoined identity? On one hand, SCEs could continue with these varied professional identities (e.g., counselor *or* educator), which may lead to continued fragmentation. Instead, similar to some participants, we suggest that SCEs consider an identity inclusive of both counseling *and* education. This conjoined, relativistic or multifaceted professional identity could be inclusive of a breadth of perspectives, existing on a continuum between education and counseling; furthermore, this identity has been suggested by others (e.g., DeKruyf et al., 2013 Lambie et al., 2019), most recently with Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021)'s nondual and nonhierarchical school counselor identity. This inclusive professional identity responds to Warren et al.'s (2020) recommendations to "unite and determine who [school counselors] are, what they do, and their value to student success" (p. 63). The identity of SCEs may impact the identities of practicing school counselors, thus in an effort to *unite* SCEs, we suggest seeking commonalities.

One final commonality demonstrated in this study was participants' commitment to advocacy and their shared passion for the field. Advocating to strengthen the profession may serve to build a bridge, reminding SCEs of their overlapping purpose. To that end, we suggest SCEs advocate within and across various ecological subsystems (e.g., preparation programs; professional organizations; program accreditation and recognition). At a micro level, to address marginalization within preparation programs, SCEs can educate mental health colleagues on the conjoined identity, enhancing how to prepare future school counselors. In addition, SCEs can develop textbooks that bridge the gap between counseling and education (e.g., Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2018), and advocate for their use within counseling graduate programs, across counseling

specialties. Further, SCEs can collaborate with colleagues in combined clinical mental health/school counseling graduate programs to intentionally incorporate interdisciplinary course assignments (Watkinson et al., 2018), emphasizing school counselors' multiple roles, and focusing on current initiatives, (e.g., Social Emotional Learning/SEL: Bowers et al., 2018; Multi-Tiered Systems of Support/MTSS: Goodman-Scott et al., 2019; and mental health: Lambie et al., 2019). On a macro level and in response to participants' desire to advocate beyond the profession, SCEs and national organizations can educate stakeholders within larger subsystems (e.g., district administrators, state and federal legislators, the public) to communicate the school counselor role, as specialists in social/emotional, academic and college/career readiness and mental health in schools.

The results of this study may lead to several future research implications. Researchers can examine SCEs' perceptions and experiences with professional changes, utilizing a larger, diverse sample (e.g., outside of the United States) and quantitative survey methods, for greater generalizability. This may also include examining strategies to strengthen SCEs' perceptions of their professional prioritization, as well as their feelings of belongingness in an *organizational home*. Next, researchers may also examine policies that have the most direct impact on school counselor preparation programs and subsequent school counselor identity. Further, researchers could use professional identity scales (Woo et al., 2017) to investigate how and whether such as a school counselor preparation programs impact school counseling practitioner identity and activities, which builds upon recent research (Fan et al., 2019). Last, research should extend beyond the United States to examine the subsystems impacting school counseling practice in other countries.

Conclusion

The SCEs in the present study discussed a myriad of perceptions and experiences pertaining to recent changes in the school counseling field in the United States, highlighting ongoing concerns related to professional training, and reinforcing scholars' claim that the school counseling profession remains at a critical juncture (Reiner & Hernandez, 2013). Although changes can be a typical aspect of professional organizations' lifecycles, how SCEs respond to these changes could serve to weaken or strengthen the profession, especially given SCEs' impact on the field.

This study highlights how the school counseling field is shaped by many subsystems, which may have similarities or differences to the practice in other countries. As the school counseling profession continues to evolve in response to societal and global trends, we are hopeful that the lessons learned may be helpful to counselor educators both in the United States and abroad, especially in places where school counseling is still in its infancy and school counselor advocacy is growing. SCEs have a pivotal role in how they manage these ebbs and flows of the trends, changes in professional associations, and the subsequent preparation of K-12 school counselors. Thus, SCEs can use their voices for unification to move the field forward and focus on the purpose of the profession: serving students and schools.

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