

# Exploring Perceptions of Advocacy

## Exploring Perceptions of Advocacy of Professional School Counselors and School Counselors-in-Training

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### Abstract

Professional school counselors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are challenged to respond to the individual needs of their students as well as responding to the needs of families and communities. In 2003, the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) National Model addressed advocacy as one of its' themes. Counselors-in-training and professional school counselors' perceptions of what delineates advocacy, advocacy actions, advocacy skills and knowledge, and advocacy obligations were surveyed.

### Exploring Perceptions of Advocacy of Professional School Counselors and School Counselors-in-Training

School settings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century present complex challenges to school counselors. Schools are composed of students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds which often results in inequitable academic resources and services (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Bemak, 2000; Lenhardt & Young, 2001). Professional school counselors' (PSCs) role as advocates for students and their families is a necessary and critical element for students' academic success in school (House & Hayes, 2002). As advocates, PSCs are required to address social, economic, and political issues that affect all students, promote equity for students and their families, and more importantly help poor and minority students to narrow the achievement gap (Bemak & Chung, 2005). The present study aims to increase understanding by exploring perceptions of advocacy of

PSCs and school counselors-in-training (SCITs).

Responding to the conceptualization of PSCs as advocates and change agents, the current literature offers an active discussion about various aspects the role of school counselors entails (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Davis, 2005; Field & Baker, 2004; House & Martin, 1998). The following section reviews current literature and includes definitions of the concept of advocacy, a description of what advocacy actions entail, a discussion of the advocacy knowledge and skills school counselors need, and a brief synopsis of advocacy obligations.

### Literature Concerning Advocacy for PSCs

The concept of advocacy for PSCs has been diversely defined in the literature. One definition of advocacy includes the "belief that individual and/ or other collective action must be taken to right injustices or to improve conditions for the benefit of an individual or groups" (House & Martin, 1998, p. 284). Others define advocacy in terms of a school counselor's ability to provide support and services to students that reach beyond the boundaries of a school office (Field & Baker, 2004). Still others have conceptualized advocacy as a process of identifying unmet needs and making changes so that these needs are met. This need-identifying process differentiates the PSCs' role as an advocate from those of consultants, collaborators, coordinators, and leaders (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

To clarify the role of an advocate, the American

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Counseling Association (ACA) Task Force on Advocacy Competencies outlines three levels of advocacy as the client/student level, the school community level and the larger public arena (Arnold, House, Lewis, & Toporek, n.d.). Each level describes both direct and indirect interventions that an advocacy oriented counselor should embrace. Examples of direct interventions for clients/students include identifying strengths and resources; identifying social, political, economic and cultural factors affecting the students/clients; and assisting students/clients in completing action plans. Indirect interventions include helping students/clients to access needed resources; identifying barriers that affect students'/clients' development or well-being; and carrying out action plans.

Collaboration and coordination are two additional indirect advocacy interventions that are essential for professional school counseling in the 21st century. PSCs often act either implicitly or explicitly as advocates in their daily activities such as the following: collaborating with teachers to find the best way for a particular student to learn; working with parents and providing strategies or interventions for their child; providing professional development in helping teachers to identify and respond to child abuse; collaborating with teachers and administrators in establishing equitable disciplinary procedures (Cooley, 1998; Stone, 2000; Trusty, 1996). Helping students and their families to resolve difficulties and meet unmet needs proactively, directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, broadly defines advocacy on the part of PSCs.

## **Advocacy Actions**

The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (2003) promotes advocacy efforts for school counselors. This involves the following: eliminating institutional barriers which may impede the development of any student; ensuring access to a quality curriculum for all students; advocating for students and the school counseling program through collaboration; and promoting systemic change through program management and professional development.

Following the ASCA model, assorted descriptions of actions taken by school counselors as advocates are described in the literature. School environments for students vary according to whether they are elementary, middle or high. Many elementary school teachers have

reported that they became teachers because they love children; middle level teachers believe that they can make a difference in the lives of young people; and high school teachers state they love their subject matter (Clement, 2004; Patrick, 2007; Wiseman, Knight, & Cooner, 2002). At the elementary level PSCs often intervene on behalf of students who may be struggling with behavioral and/or developmental issues. Middle level PSCs may also be faced with similar situations as the elementary school counselors, but students at the middle level are less likely to display difficulties emotionally, physically or mentally (Davis, 2005). Students at the high school level are least likely to display difficulties in these areas (Gottfredson, 2001). PSCs work to enhance the maturity level of students at both middle and high school levels and encourage students to take responsibility for their own actions (Patrick). Guiding and teaching students and families how to delineate responsibilities and how to set and achieve goals independently of PSCs is one example of how to promote advocacy through action (Beale, 2004).

## **Advocacy Knowledge and Skills**

In order to advocate successfully, PSCs need to develop knowledge and skills that will allow them to adapt to complex situations in 21<sup>st</sup> century school settings. Knowledge refers to what the PSC knows and skills refer to what the PSC is able to do (Brown & Trusty, 2005). PSCs should be knowledgeable in the following areas: resources, parameters, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change. Knowledge of resources within and outside of schools like programs, institutions, agencies, and community groups is necessary for effective advocacy efforts (Brown & Trusty; Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Osbourne, Collison, House, Gray, Firth, & Mary, 1998). Knowledge of parameters includes knowing school policies and procedures, possessing knowledge of legal rights of students and families, and adhering to ASCA's code of ethics (2004). Dispute resolution mechanisms such as mediation and conflict resolution strategies are often necessary for successful advocacy efforts. Finally, possessing a systems perspective and understanding how systems and subsystems operate and forming partnerships across subsystems (i.e., parents, students, community groups, district administrations, and school staff) are necessary for positive advocacy results (Brown & Trusty).

In addition, PSCs should possess communication skills, collaboration skills, problem assessment and problem solving skills, organizational skills, and self-

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care skills (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Arnold, et al., n.d.). Communication skills allow effective understanding of factors which might impinge upon optimal development of students. Collaboration skills help to maintain strong relationships with parents, administrators, and professionals outside of the school for effective advocacy efforts.

## **Advocacy Obligations**

According to the ASCA National Model (2003), PSCs are required to play multiple roles as advocates. Systematic observations and data collection enable school counselors to identify the need for changes at the school or community level. In addition, PSCs need to incorporate data locally, regionally, and nationally to foster system changes in an effort to promote high educational standards for all children (Brown & Trusty, 2005; House & Hayes, 2002).

Defining advocacy obligations is often related to both legal and ethical considerations. From a legal perspective, any person working in schools who may either suspect or has knowledge of a student being physically, emotionally or sexually abused, or neglected is a mandated reporter and is obligated to report the abuse to appropriate school personnel. The PSC is obligated to provide support to the identified student as child protective services investigate charges (Baker & Gerler, 2004).

## **Method**

### **Purpose of Study**

A survey approach was utilized to explore perceptions of advocacy of school counselors-in-training and practicing PSCs (Appendix). Specifically, SCITs and PSCs perceptions of how to define advocacy, what are believed to be advocacy actions, skills and knowledge needed to advocate successfully, and the degree to which one is obliged to advocate were surveyed.

The first hypothesis was related to the influence of counseling experience on perceptions of advocacy assuming that experience would lead to different perceptions on different aspects of advocacy. The second hypothesis examined whether taking a class with advocacy as a major course objective would impact participants' perceptions of advocacy. The final hypothesis examined whether school environments would impact the participants'

views of advocacy. It was assumed that different working environments (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school level) would influence how school counselors view advocacy for students and their families.

### **Participants and Procedure**

A total of 80 participants voluntarily participated in the study. The participants included 75 females and five males, 57 Caucasians, 21 African Americans, 1 Hispanic and 1 Asian. Their ages ranged from 22 to 69 years old. Fifty-five participants had a bachelor's degree, 17 of them had a master's degree, and 8 of them had a specialist's degree. Fifty-six participants were SCITs, had no prior experience in school counseling, and were enrolled in a master's degree school counseling program. The program is accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2001). The other 24 participants were PSCs. Their experience in school counseling ranged from 1-34 years. At the time of the study, 41 of the participants were employed as teachers; 18 were elementary school teachers, 14 were middle school teachers, and 9 were high school teachers. Of all the participants, 37 have taken a course in which advocacy was a significant objective and 43 never took such a course.

The participants were treated in accordance with the ethical standards of the American School Counselor's Association (ASCA, 2004) and participated in the study anonymously. SCITs gave written informed consent and were assured of their right to refuse participation in the study without any negative consequences. A survey questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in either practicum or internship classes. Instructors for these classes were provided with written instructions to follow for administration of the survey.

PSCs were also treated in accordance with the ethical standards of ASCA (2004) and participated in the study anonymously. Permission was gained from a local school district personnel to administer the survey to school counselors in the district. Informed consent forms were included in the survey packet and PSCs were assured of their rights to participate or refuse participation with no negative consequences. All participants were provided with written instructions to follow and were given 2 weeks to complete the survey on an individual basis. The survey packet included information on how to contact the researchers. Each school had one person designated to collect the surveys. Completed surveys were then

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delivered by designees and secured at the district office until retrieved by one of the researchers.

## **Survey Instrument**

An appropriate instrument that assesses perceptions of advocacy in the field of counseling was not located; therefore the researchers synthesized the literature and identified definitions of advocacy, advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations as the important components to examine perceptions of advocacy for school counselors. These four components were used to structure the survey questionnaire entitled "School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families" (Appendix A & B).

The survey questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected demographic information of the participants. (Appendix A) The second section contains four subscales that measure participants' perceptions of advocacy definition, advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations on a 5 point Likert scale, with 1 as "strongly disagree" and 5 as "strongly agree" (Appendix B). Each subscale contains 10 items synthesized from recent literature (ACA, 2005; ASCA, 2003; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Education Trust, 2003).

The first subscale, defining advocacy, began with the stem, "As a School Counselor, I believe the following are definitions of advocacy." Sample statements included "supporting school and social reform," and "collaborating with community agencies that provide services to students and their families." The second subscale, advocacy actions, shared the same basic stem as the first subscale. Sample advocacy actions statements included "empowering parents to advocate for their children," and "acting as a student advocate before disciplinary bodies." Advocacy skills and knowledge, subscale 3 began with the stem statement, "As a School Counselor engaged in advocacy, I believe the following skills and knowledge are important." Sample statements included, "ability to utilize resources within and outside of the school," and "collection and presentation of data." Subscale 4, advocacy obligations, shared the same basic stem as subscales 1 and 2. Sample advocacy obligations statements included, "act as a resource broker within the community to help students achieve academic success," and "be aware of discriminatory practices within the school, community and greater society."

The instrument was reviewed by three counselor educators in the field of school counseling. Upon review,

minor revisions were made to the first page of the survey designed to collect demographic data. The survey questionnaire was pilot tested during the spring and summer semesters of 2004 with SCIT volunteers enrolled in the College of Education. Thirty-five graduate students participated in the pilot study and no further revisions were necessary to the survey. Internal consistency of the questionnaire evidenced by Cronbach's Alpha was 0.99 for all four subscales combined, and 0.94 for the advocacy definition subscale, 0.93 for the advocacy actions subscale, 0.96 for the advocacy skills and knowledge, and 0.96 for the advocacy obligations respectively.

## **Results**

A series of one-way ANOVA procedures was conducted to test the three hypotheses. Specifically, an examination of the influence of experience in school counseling, whether or not a class in advocacy was taken, professional status, and school settings on participants' perceptions of advocacy was made. First, an inquiry into the impact of the professional practice of school counseling and perceptions of advocacy was determined. The participants were divided into two groups. The first group of participants had at least 6 months experience in school counseling practice (n=24). They included school counselors in practice and the graduate students who gained some experience of school counseling through practicum or internship in their training program. The participants who had no such experience formed the other group (n=56). Results of the one-way ANOVA indicated that the non-experienced group reported a significantly higher mean score (M=4.43; SD=0.75) on the definition of advocacy than the experienced group (M=4.06; SD=.064) indicating that participants with no experience in schools perceived advocacy more altruistically than those who had experiences in schools. An example included responses to the statement "Going above and beyond the status quo to help students and their families." Participants who had no experience in schools "strongly agreed" (rating of 5) with this statement while the majority of participants who had experience in schools tended to have "no opinion" (rating of 3) with the statement. No significance was found between the two groups in their perceptions of advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations and all four subscales combined.

Second, whether or not the professional status would impact participants' views on advocacy was examined.

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The participants were divided into two groups based on their professional status. Those who were PSCs formed one group (n=24) and those who were SCITs formed the other group (n=56). Results of the ANOVA indicated no significant difference between the two groups regarding their perceptions of advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations and all four subscales combined.

Following the above results, Table 1 demonstrates, the participants with no experience in school counseling reported significantly higher mean scores on item 2,

“taking a stand for the rights of students,” (M=4.14), item 3, “working to change school and system policies and procedures that are inequitable to individuals and groups of students and their families,” (M=4.63), Item 5, “promoting social and educational equity for ALL students,” (M=4.61), and item 8, “teaching students and parents about their rights and helping them to make changes for themselves with promote social justice,” (M=4.39) than the participants who had experience. The same results were found on the professional status variable. SCITs reported significantly higher means on Item 2 (M=4.69), Item 3 (M=4.62), Item 5 (M=4.62)

**Table 1**

**Means and Standard Deviations on the Items of the Defining Advocacy Scale by Experience and Professional Status**

	School counselors define advocacy as:	No Experience Group		Experienced Group		Counselors in Training		Practicing Counselors	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1	Going above and beyond the status quo to assist students and their families	4.14	.94	3.73	1.03	4.13	.94	3.83	1.05
2*	Taking a stand for their rights of students	4.70	.74	4.18	.66	4.69	.74	4.21	.66
3*	Working to change school and system policies and procedures that are inequitable to individuals and groups of students and their families	4.63	.75	3.86	.83	4.62	.76	3.92	.83
4	Supporting social and school reform	4.23	.93	3.86	.64	4.24	.94	3.88	.61
5*	Promoting social and educational equity for ALL students	4.61	.82	4.14	.83	4.62	.83	4.13	.80
6	Emphasizing referrals and use of resources in the larger community to assist students and their families.	4.34	.92	4.23	.81	4.33	.92	4.29	.81
7	Collaborating with community agencies that provide services to students and their families	4.50	.87	4.14	.83	4.49	.88	4.17	.82
8*	Teaching students and parents about their rights and helping them to make changes for themselves which promote social justice.	4.39	.95	3.82	.85	4.40	.96	3.88	.85
9	Taking a stand for families	4.27	.98	4.00	.76	4.27	.99	4.00	.72
10	Emphasizing parental involvement in a child's education	4.48	.93	4.50	1.01	4.49	.94	4.50	.98

\* Statistically significant differences were found on these items between the experienced vs. no experience group and between the practicing counselors vs. counselors in training at the .05 level

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and Item 8  $M=4.40$  than practicing PSCs.

Third, whether taking a class with advocacy as a major course objective would impact participants' perceptions of advocacy was examined. Those who had taken an advocacy course formed one group ( $n=40$ ) and those who had not taken such a course formed the other group ( $n=40$ ). Results of the one-way ANOVA analysis indicate there is no significant difference between the two groups regarding their perceptions of definitions of advocacy, advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations and all four subscales combined.

Finally, whether the school environments would impact on the participants' views of advocacy was examined. The participants were divided into four groups based on the school setting in which they were working. Those who were full-time students formed group one ( $n=40$ ), those working in elementary schools formed group two ( $n=16$ ), those working in middle schools formed group three ( $n=15$ ), and those working in high schools formed group four ( $n=9$ ).

## Discussion

The purpose was to gain a clearer understanding of perceptions surrounding different aspects of advocacy. The research was aimed at defining the role, actions, competencies, and obligations of the school counselor as advocate. Insights that may help improve the training of both SCITs and PSCs was also sought. In this section, the findings of the study in relation to the literature reviewed are discussed.

Data analyses focused on examining the influence of having experience as a PSC, completing a course in advocacy, and school settings on participants' perceptions of advocacy. Findings failed to support the proposition that gaining experience as a PSC is important in developing a professional viewpoint regarding advocacy (ACA, 2005; Education Trust, 2003). In fact, the results indicate that there is no significant difference between the experienced group and the non-experienced group on the views of advocacy actions, knowledge and skills required to advocate for students and their families, and advocacy obligations.

These findings suggest that experience in school counseling practice would not make a difference on how school counselors define advocacy. According to the data, having experience as a PSC in and of itself does not insure a commitment to advocacy. The data does suggest that

SCITs may be idealistic and have a greater consideration of the counselor's role as advocate.

Furthermore, the results indicate how taking an advocacy course did not make a difference on school counselors' views of advocacy. The advocacy oriented counselor is able to identify environmental factors which may serve as barriers to students' development and provide and interpret data showing the need for change (Arnold, et al., n.d.).

The second major finding points to the influence of different school settings on the perceptions of advocacy. Overall views of advocacy were also found to be significantly different between full time students at the (4.45), elementary (4.40), middle (4.33) and high school (3.67) levels. In addition to advocacy being one of the four themes in ASCA's National Model (2003), the Education Trust's Transforming School Counseling Initiative (2003) emphasized the importance of PSCs advocating for access to a rigorous academic education for all students. These paradigms are discussed in classes so that full time students in the field of counseling are particularly cognizant of the importance of becoming an advocate (Cobia & Henderson, 2007; House & Hayes, 2002).

Findings from the study indicate overall differing perceptions and definitions of advocacy according to whether one is a student, or practitioner, and whether or not one is employed at the elementary, middle or high school level. This may be due to particular survey statements and the reality of working in school settings. For example, defining advocacy, survey item 3 stated "working to change school and system policies and procedures that are inequitable to individuals and groups of students and their families," indicated that SCITs had a higher mean (4.62) than PSCs (3.92). Many practicing PSCs may feel that making changes at school and system levels is not possible to attain, whereas SCITs may not have an idea of what is needed to make changes in schools and systems.

## Implications for school counselors

The greater understanding PSCs possess in regard to advocacy and knowledge needed to respond as advocates, the more likely issues will be resolved adequately (Baker & Gerler, 2004). Through advocacy class assignments and lectures, counselor educators should train their students to be more active than passive, and be informed and committed to providing the best counseling services

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possible (Bemak & Chung, 2005). In addition, counselor educators should prepare students to have a systems perspective and understand how systems and subsystems operate and how to form partnerships across subsystems (i.e., parents, students, community groups, district administrations, and school staff) in order to have positive results as advocates (Brown & Trusty, 2005). When PSCs become aware of external factors that may act as barriers to an individual or to students' development, they may choose to respond through advocacy. Becoming an advocate is an integral part of current national standards and a crucial component of a school counselor's professional competence (Education Trust, 2003).

Counselor education programs could help PSCs who have been practicing in the field by providing continuing education courses/modules/seminars to keep them updated as to current trends in the field. Many practitioners lack both time and opportunity to explore the most recent literature surrounding their chosen profession.

ASCA's National Model (2003) focuses on school counselors advocating for systemic change through program management and development. As PSCs advocate for the elimination of institutional barriers which may impede the development of any student and for access to a quality curriculum for all students, school counseling programs would serve to empower both students and families. Preparing students with the necessary competencies for a successful future speaks to the heart of what school counselors' desire.

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**Please E-mail the author regarding the instrument.**