

Nurturing a Garden: A Qualitative Investigation Into School Counselors' Experiences With Gifted Students

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There has been a noticeable lack of research concerning how gifted adolescents work with school counselors. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to investigate K–12 school counselors' knowledge of and experience with gifted students. An emergent, inductive data analysis of interviews and written artifacts of school counselors revealed the following 8 major themes: the counseling relationship, experience with gifted traits, challenge and rigor, beliefs and philosophy, identification and services, collaborative relationships, concerns and constraints, and training and knowledge. Implications for school counselor training regarding service delivery to gifted students and areas for future research are included.

In a review of the gifted literature, Robinson (2002) suggested that challenges gifted students face can be synthesized and grouped into the following areas: gifted students' asynchronous development when compared to nongifted peers, gifted students' ability to manage and regulate their emotional responses, and gifted students' membership in groups with special needs (culturally diverse backgrounds, rural populations, GLBTQ, and gifted students with disabilities). Gifted students also encounter concerns and challenges that their nongifted peers experience, such as moving; illness; separation, divorce, and remarriages within the family; death and other losses; peer conflicts; abuse and neglect; and substance abuse (Peterson, 2006). But their gifted traits and characteristics can make these life events and situations harder to cope with and cause gifted students to experience them differently from nongifted peers (Peterson, 2006). Hence, there is a need for counseling of gifted students around issues that arise along the

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normal developmental trajectory, but which are compounded by the additional task of navigating the traditional developmental milestones of childhood and adolescence as a gifted individual (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Colangelo, 2003; Peterson, 2006).

Traditionally, the teacher of the gifted child has served as the primary contact for counseling; however, meeting the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of all students in the schools has been the province of the school counselor. The professional school counselor is in a unique position to address the counseling concerns of gifted students.

Although there is a recognized need for counseling services, especially for gifted adolescents (Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997; Yoo & Moon, 2006), there is a noticeable lack of research concerning how school counselors work with gifted students. There have been only a handful of studies examining school counselors' involvement with gifted students (Carlson, 2004; Dockery, 2005; Earle, 1998). Although the field of gifted education has already established activities and service delivery models that school counselors can employ that potentially benefit gifted students (Buescher, 1985; Colangelo, 2003; Mahoney, 1997; Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007; Moon, 2002; Reis & Moon, 2002; Siegle & McCoach, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Van Tassel-Baska, 1998), few of these have made their way into the general school counseling literature base. Nor have the majority of these counseling activities, techniques, or models been tested empirically to ascertain their levels of effectiveness in the schools. In fact, "there is almost no outcome research available on the efficacy of specific counseling and modalities, approaches, or strategies, with gifted individuals and their families" (Moon, 2002, p. 218). Hence, there is a need for research exploring the relationship between the school counselor and his or her relationship with the gifted student and the theories, techniques, and activities that school counselors can employ in their service to this population (Moon, 2002; Peterson, 2006). Thus, the purpose of this study is to answer this question: What are school counselors' experiences with gifted students?

Review of Related Literature

School Counselor Roles and Responsibilities and Services

By nature of their profession, school counselors are responsible for serving a vast array of student populations and systematically analyzing how their contributions benefit all of the students that they serve (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2003a). The ASCA's National Model (2003a) provides the context in which school counselors can build the frame of their own school building's comprehensive, developmental guidance and counseling program. The model emphasizes four components: foundation and philosophy, service delivery, management systems, and accountability (ASCA, 2003a). Within the foundation component, ASCA (2003a) proposes academic, career, and personal-social domain areas outlining standards that all students should master within K–12 education. The service delivery component suggests multiple vehicles by which school counselors can work with students, including small groups, individual planning, and classroom guidance lessons. The model still retains much of the school counselors' traditional activities such as consultation, coordination, and counseling; however, school counselors, with the national call for accountability, are required to demonstrate their program's effectiveness by determining to what degree their students meet competencies within each domain and how each of the school counselor's activities contribute to student achievement.

Recently, the school counseling profession has drawn attention to and highlighted school counselors' involvement specifically with gifted students (Milsom & Peterson, 2006). The professional school counselor is a key person in the advocacy of special populations in schools who plays an important part in the talent development of gifted students (ASCA, 2003b).

The ASCA position statement on the school counselor's involvement articulates the roles and responsibilities school counselors can assume when serving their gifted students, including the following: (a) the identification of gifted students;

(b) the advocacy for counseling activities that address the academic, career, and personal/social needs of the gifted through individual and group guidance; (c) the provision of resources and materials; (d) raising awareness of gifted issues such as those discussed above; and (e) engaging in professional development activities in order to facilitate their continuing education in the area of psychology and development of gifted students (ASCA, 2003b).

School Counselor Training

Currently professional school counselors graduating from Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited institutions are not required to take specialized classes in gifted and talented education in order to increase their awareness or range of skills (Olenchak, 2001). Peterson and Wachter Morris (2010) asserted that, of the CACREP- accredited graduate programs that participated in their study, only 62% gave any attention in their counselor preparation to counseling issues of high-ability or gifted learners, and 47% dedicated 3 or fewer contact hours (Peterson, 2006). This finding suggests that school counselors may encounter difficulties in serving gifted students if they do not feel they have the adequate knowledge or skills as a result of their master's preparation (Peterson, 2006).

Research Regarding School Counselors and Gifted Students

Studies focusing on school counselors' attitudes, knowledge, and skills regarding gifted students have reported that school counselors' preparation, perceptions, experience, and training all impact their service to gifted students. First, although school counselors may believe they are effective when differentiating their counseling in terms of pace, depth, novelty, and complexity to match their gifted students' developmental level, they may also feel ill prepared to meet the needs of these students (Earle, 1998). Second, while school counselors with more years of experience are

more likely to report that they have more knowledge about gifted students via in-service workshops, high school counselors, in general, have the least amount of involvement with these students. School counselors who have a gifted program or a gifted specialist in their building are more likely to be knowledgeable about gifted and talented students and more involved with them (Carlson, 2004). Third, perceptions of and knowledge about gifted students, including identification knowledge, can be linked to school counselors' involvement with gifted students in areas of advocacy (Carlson, 2004). For example, school counselors in specialized high schools for the gifted do not necessarily perceive that their gifted students are any different from any other adolescents and thus are not in need of differentiated counseling (Dockery, 2005).

Anecdotal evidence supports the idea that gifted teens believe that school counselors are available and appropriate for others, but not for them as gifted students (Peterson, 2003). If gifted students are not seeking services from their school counselors, school counselors may not be in a position to know what their gifted students actually need from them.

Hence, there is a need for outcome research that focuses on the gifted students and their school counselors. Research concerning what school counselors currently do to help gifted students is vital if effective school counseling programming, strategies, techniques, and activities are to be implemented to benefit gifted and talented students. The purpose of this study is to begin to fill the gap in the literature base by providing information on how school counselors work with their gifted students.

Rationale for the Study: Practical and Personal

It is important for qualitative researchers to acknowledge all experiences, beliefs, and potential biases related to the issues addressed in the study at hand. I have been both a middle school counselor and a counselor for the gifted in residential programs. My master's and doctoral coursework required me to immerse myself in research and literature pertaining to school counseling and gifted education. Given my own background and what I have read, I believe that most school counselors are not formally trained

to work with gifted students. I also believe that gifted students present unique counseling issues, by nature of their giftedness, and require what could be seen as a differentiation of counseling services in order to work with those issues. However, both gifted education and the school counseling profession lack a distinct branch of inquiry that details the interactions between school counselors and their gifted students. I am suggesting that, in order for effective programming and services to be provided to gifted students and their parents, it becomes necessary to first establish what is currently happening in the world of school counselors as they work with this population.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a better understanding of what is currently happening with school counselors and gifted students. Specifically, this study seeks to find more information about the experiences of school counselors with gifted students, including services, knowledge, and training pertaining to this population.

Method

This qualitative study is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm. Rossman and Rallis (2003) described the interpretive paradigm as one in which research “tries to understand the social world as it is (the status quo) from the perspective of individual experience, hence an interest in subjective worldviews” (p. 46). Swandt (2001) wrote that the interpretive tradition is an approach to studying life that assumes meaning as a part of human action, and that the job of the qualitative inquirer is to bring to light that meaning. The focus of this study was on the experiences of school counselors who work with gifted students and the meanings of those experiences as represented in in-depth interviews and any written artifacts provided by the school counselor participants.

Approach and Strategy: Phenomenology

Patton (2002, p. 104) suggested that all phenomenological approaches share a focus on the exploration of how humans make

sense of experience (perception, description, feelings, judgments, memories, sensations, and discussion with others). There are three specific implications related to a phenomenological approach: (a) there is an inherent importance in knowing what people experience and how they interpret the world; (b) in order to understand a person's experience, we must experience it as directly as possible; and (c) there is an essence or multiple essences to a shared experience that are mutually understood through a phenomenon experienced (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenological studies center on illuminating the individual's lived experience and, in this case, the lived experiences of school counselors in a Midwestern state working with gifted students in their buildings. In this study, the unit of analysis was the individual school counselor.

This study does not include hypotheses, although it does propose the following guiding research questions:

1. What are school counselors' experiences with gifted students?
2. What is their current training regarding gifted students and/or their knowledge and understanding of gifted students?
3. What services do school counselors provide to their gifted students and how do the school counselors perceive the effectiveness of those services?

Sampling/Selection of the Participants

Professional school counselors serve gifted students within a wide age and developmental range in public schools, from kindergarten to senior high school. In order to gain a deeper understanding of school counselor experiences at each level, I sought a maximum variation sampling: elementary (grades K–5 or ages 6–11), middle/junior high (grades 6–8 or ages 11–14), and high school (grades 9–12 or ages 14–18). Participants were solicited using two electronic listservs that served K–12 school counselors in a Midwestern state. Seven professional school counselors chose to participate. Each participant designated a pseudonym by which their data would be represented. Table 1 reflects the participants' demographics. The participants are discussed below.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Name	Gender	Prior background	Formal education/training	Years experience	Current placement as a school counselor
Polly	F	High school teacher	Secondary education (BA) School counseling (MA)	10 (elementary)	1. Pre-K/K-1 2. Grades 2-4
Cindy	F	Substitute teaching	Elementary education (BA) School counseling (MA)	4 (elementary school)	Pre-K to grade 4
Heather	F	Educational assistant	School counseling (MA)	2 (high school)	Grades 10-12
Skye	F	Middle school teacher	Secondary education (BA) School counseling (MA)	2 (high school)	Grades 9-12
Patricia	F	None given	School counseling (MA)	11 (middle school) 10 (high school)	Grades 9-12 (Specified as TAG counselor)
Sarah	F	None given	Psychology (BA) School counseling (MA)	3 (high school)	Grades 9-12
Dale	M	Junior high school teacher Military engineering	Education (BA) School counseling (MA)	28 (middle/junior high)	Retired 2006

Polly was an elementary school counselor serving two buildings, grades pre-K–1 and grades 2–4, and had 10 years of experience as a school counselor and 4 years of high school teaching prior to becoming a school counselor. She was working on her doctorate in counselor education while being a full-time school counselor. Cindy, who had a teaching degree in elementary education, had worked for 4 years as an elementary school counselor. She served in two buildings as well: grades pre-K and grades pre-K–4.

Heather had 2 years of experience as a counselor for grades 10–12 in high school. Skye worked as a teacher for a few years before and while she was becoming a school counselor. Skye worked as a high school counselor for grades 9–12, and was responsible for students in a particular alphabetical range. The following year she was to be the department chair for the school counselors. Patricia was a junior high counselor for 10 years before becoming a high school counselor. She specifically was designated as the talented and gifted counselor in her high school building. Sarah had been a ninth-grade school counselor for 3 years.

Dale had been a high school science teacher for 5 years before leaving education for Vietnam. He later became a junior high school counselor and worked at this level or at the middle school level for 28 years, until his retirement directly prior to the beginning of this study.

Data Collection

Each school counselor participated in a 1–2-hour interview exploring their experiences with gifted students. The structured open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) asked participants about the following:

- their background and training in school counseling,
- their training and knowledge pertaining to gifted students,
- their experiences with gifted students,
- their experiences with counseling needs of gifted students,
- how they perceived the benefits and success (or lack of benefit/success) of these services to their gifted students,

- their experiences with gifted students and the overall school counseling program, and
- any thoughts they had about training and education of future school counselors.

I also asked the participants to respond to a typed question in order to collect artifacts representing their experiences with the needs of gifted students and how school counselors could meet those needs (Appendix B).

After interviews were conducted, I transcribed the interviews verbatim and then sent them to the participants for member-checking via e-mail. Participants then made changes by adding, deleting, or editing sentences in order to better capture their personal experiences and meaning. Participants sent back written artifacts via e-mail.

Data Coding and Analysis

I analyzed interviews and written artifacts using emergent, inductive data analysis with the unit of data analysis being the sentence. I examined the sentences in the interviews and artifacts for recurring concepts or ideas that were captured using etic or researcher-constructed categories.

Trustworthiness

In any qualitative inquiry, the researcher must consistently safeguard the trustworthiness of the study by examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings. In order to establish the credibility of findings, I kept a reflexive journal, requested member checks from each participant, and debriefed with a peer who had more than 10 years of experience working with qualitative inquiry. I also conducted a purposeful sampling in which I strove to capture the experiences of school counselors practicing in a wide range of age ranges and grade levels. Through interviews and artifact collection I gathered a thick description of school counselors' experiences with their gifted students in a Midwestern state in order to establish a level

of transferability. Although it is impossible and inappropriate for a qualitative study to claim generalizability, if the study were to be done again, another researcher could easily follow my audit trail and use the reflexive journal to determine how differences in findings might have occurred. In addition, my research as instrument statement as well as my reflexive journal and other documents in my audit trail acknowledge personal biases toward the data and its interpretation.

Findings

Eight major themes or axial categories emerged through data analysis: *the counseling relationship, experience with gifted traits, challenge and rigor, beliefs and philosophy, identification and services, collaborative relationships, concerns and constraints, and training and knowledge*. In order to more fully explore the themes behind the school counselors' experiences with their gifted students, the metaphor of a garden and gardener will be used. Metaphors are a powerful way of communicating meaning of qualitative results (Patton, 2002).

The Counseling Relationship

A gardener working with an unknown plant for the first time takes time to understand the plant, its unique growing cycle and the type of soil, sun, and water it will require. Similarly, school counselor participants in this study established relationships with their gifted students through which they learned about the students' unique personalities and needs. Cindy describes getting to know students

in class and then after I know their personalities you can kind of see where their needs are. It depends on whether they're a worrier or not, and how much they're going to process things. I think you really have to get to know the student and then you see what the needs are.

School counselors in this study invested in their relationships with students through conversation and dialogue. The level of trust and comfort with their counselor and the degree to which they engaged in the relationship varied among the students. Patricia revealed that interactions with her gifted students depended on the comfort level of the student:

I think that if the student is willing—I meet with them every year—but if the student is willing on their [*sic*]own to talk about some of the issues that come in on their own . . . students are much better served than those who don't bother to ask questions or come in. I meet with them all, but sometimes you just get a better relationship with some of them.

Some students were comfortable enough to specifically seek out the school counselor. In fact, Sarah reported that a “student who was referred for mental health services did not want to come to the gifted teacher. I don't know if he felt that the counselor title was better or not, but it gives them another avenue to talk to someone if they don't feel comfortable with their gifted teacher.” Sarah also stated that the teachers who did have positive relationships with the gifted students acted both as a source of referral and as a bridge of trust between her and the student.

The relationship between the school counselor and gifted student could be beneficial for both. Heather's conversations with her gifted students helped her understand their individual personalities and needs more, so that she could then write letters of recommendation for her high school junior students going to summer programs. She said, “what happens after that time . . . they do pop their heads in to say ‘hi’ and we dialogue about the next year. So that's really the jumping off point for their senior year when I get really close with many of the seniors through those personal conversations.”

Experiences With Gifted Traits

Gardeners may be taken by surprise when a plant reveals a new furl or frond or does not react to sun and water in the way

a book on gardening reports that it should or must. Participants described being surprised by conversations with their gifted students who demonstrated typical gifted traits such as rapid cognitive processing, asking existential questions, and increased self-reflection and awareness. Dale remarked that this surprise is not uncommon for counselors who have not had much experience with gifted students outside the classroom, “You can have [school counselors] read books, and talk about it, but until you’re on your own you don’t know how bright some of these kids are.”

Counselors in this study also described their experience with a lack of a counseling theory or set of techniques that could work appropriately with cognitively advanced students. Cindy recognized that her traditional approaches to individual counseling might not work with gifted students.

I think the counselor should know some tricks to pull out of their [*sic*] bag. . . . They should be using counseling theory like what theory they would use to get that kid to think more rationally about something. Thinking about their counseling skills. TAG [talented and gifted students] . . . they may be able to move along quite a bit faster. So if you were to do a person-centered approach, they might be really bored and think that the counseling session is pretty lame. You can ask for more critical-thinking questions, too. I think [the school counselor] should be ready to counsel to their level.

Skye stated she felt she needed to revisit her counseling skills, especially active listening, paraphrasing, and summarizing because her gifted students were so quick:

I find myself going back so often to some of the micro counseling skills. “Okay, can I just repeat what they said to make sure I got it?” Because their minds are going so fast and four or five things are coming out at once. So I say “Okay, I’ve got to make sure that I am following that.” Something that more and more often, more than any other kids, with the gifted kids, I say to myself, “Okay, I have to make sure can I give back to them what they just said to me so that I can under-

stand where they are coming from.” So the listening piece of it is so big.

Heather remarked about her challenges with her gifted students’ level of self-awareness: “what has been really challenging for me . . . because I’m not a fast decision maker . . . to have these kids who are really . . . so many of them are self-aware . . . Well, I never asked questions of myself when I was in high school.”

Cindy reflected on her work with gifted students who were insightful, intuitive, and in-tune with environmental issues, but who could not understand why their nongifted peers could not relate to their concerns:

They are the kids that [*sic*] might hear about global warming and get really upset. And then they don’t know how to deal with that and when their peers don’t get as upset as they are, they don’t understand that or why and then they’re upset. Also, I think socially, they can see things happen in the classroom with other people and they might get upset and they don’t know how to deal with that.

Cindy described the students’ demonstration of asynchronous development. In this case, her students had the ability to understand complex world issues and to cognitively understand peer dynamics in the classroom, but struggled with a lack of an emotional-coping repertoire.

In some of the participating school counselors’ experience, gifted students’ advanced cognitive abilities gave them an ability to expose, deflect, or work around traditional counseling techniques. Dale stated, “Many of the gifted kids are bright enough to see that if you’re counseling them, you are trying to get them to make change and they may not be willing to make that change. ‘Don’t use that “*counselorese*” on me . . . !” Dale continued to describe his experiences with gifted students whose advanced cognitive ability and self-reliance impacted their ability to seek help and work with change:

A lot of times gifted kids, because they are bright, think they know it all, and they think it’s other people’s problems, not

theirs. And until they feel comfortable discussing some of the things that are going on, they seem very defensive. . . . Many of those kids are resistant because they are so capable of doing things themselves. Then when they are in a situation where they're not capable of handling it, they are resistant, or they look down on themselves or think they should be able to handle it. . . . They can be very intimidating because sometimes they're brighter than a counselor or at least they like to give that impression. And so they will be resistant to that kind of help.

These traits, Dale warned, can surprise the unwary school counselor: "While these kids can do so much stuff, many times I think the inexperienced counselor gets fooled into the belief that since they can communicate at one level, then maybe they don't need counseling or the help."

Challenge and Rigor

Each plant is unique in what it requires in terms of earth and sunlight. Some plants do not thrive when they experience soil that is too wet or too dry. Participants reported that their gifted students contended with a range of educational "soil" that either enhanced or detracted from their learning in the classroom. Gifted students reported to their school counselors differences in challenge and rigor in their classrooms. Almost all of the participants remarked about how the issues of challenge and rigor had an effect on their gifted students and therefore also had impact on counseling services and interactions.

School counselors in this study experienced gifted students recounting a lack of academic challenge, a lack of fit between the learning environment and their abilities, or a lack of meaning and relevance in what they were learning. Participants also had some students discuss with them that, due to the lack of fit or lack of relevance, the students responded with a lack of interest in what was going on in the classroom. Dale said,

A lot of times the academic counseling is what they'd need a lot of help with because many of them don't see the value in "What? I have to do 50 problems if I understand it on the first problem? And when I get done early I have to do more? And more of the same stuff?" They're kind of wondering "Why do I have to do 50 problems when I understand in the first two problems?"

Participating school counselors conveyed that they involved themselves in finding challenging courses, scheduling students differently, or working with classroom teachers to facilitate a healthy sense of challenge. Sarah reported that, "I do feel that I work a lot more on scheduling with the gifted students than the nongifted because they're wanting something more challenging, and they actually tend to sit down with me and want to discuss their schedule more." Dale described working with the classroom teachers to

maybe find some other way of understanding how the same menial task could be changed at their level within the classroom. Sometimes I would try to encourage the teachers to come out with some more difficult or challenging problems so maybe if they had to be doing the same number of problems they could be doing something that fits them better.

Patricia noted that, as she is also the Advanced Placement (AP) coordinator in her school, her role has put her into contact with more gifted students and allowed her to have a more intimate knowledge of their needs. She said,

Particularly I work with the talented and gifted (TAG) students. Their choices are different than other students. In the advanced classes—I am also the AP coordinator here in the school—so I work with the AP teachers and the advanced teachers about what goes on in their classrooms. So I kind of know what they're doing, or what happens with students, or if they are slipping or those sorts of things.

As a result, Patricia said, "We've really stepped up our academic program: our academic rigor and getting our students

to pick the most rigorous classes, having them involved with activities, having a pulse on where they are.”

Polly, Patricia, and Cindy were school counselors who advocated for and facilitated the process of acceleration in order for their students to receive the appropriate level of challenge. Cindy observed that there were positive outcomes of acceleration, both academically and socially:

My first year I worked for the TAG teacher, since we had tried getting a student accelerated a grade. That really helped that student. He was in a better class so he fit in better socially. The group of kids he was with—their personalities matched better than the other class he was in, and there were some other students who were pretty bright. So he was better off socially. I think he was really ready for the harder curriculum.

Patricia elaborated on her experiences with holding high expectations of a student who needed acceleration in science:

I had a student who started out in the ninth grade in the general science class. . . . In the middle school teams sometimes they tell them not to take too many of the hard classes, but I tell them take as many as you can. So he had two or three weeks in the general science class, and then he came and said, “I just think it’s too easy” so we were able to switch into the biology class with the biology teacher, who was willing to take him. And the next semester she [the biology teacher] came and said he shouldn’t even be in biology so we switched to the advanced biology class second semester.

On the other hand, participants in this study also reported that, for some of their gifted students, experiencing challenge in the classroom for the first time was accompanied by struggle, pressure, and stress; underachievement; and a growing internal belief that something was wrong with them because they could not cope with this new level of rigor. Sarah explained that one of her students

has become very distraught by not doing as well as he hoped in one of his honors classes, and, you know, doing as well

as he hoped is an A- compared to an A+. It's not that he's doing horrible by any means. He's just very worried that he has something wrong with him. He's very concerned because he's never been this challenged. I think it's just because high school has become a little bit more difficult.

Sometimes students reported that they were overwhelmed by stress and were withdrawing academically. Skye said, "a lot of the gifted students feel a great deal of pressure, and what we get from them is shut down." She went on to describe her experiences with gifted students who were reporting being overly challenged and having difficulty in their search for their own identity in the midst of their many obligations:

I think a lot of them also are struggling with . . . the seniors especially . . . want to be a normal high school student, and they've taken so many AP courses, they've taken PSCO classes, they're doing all of these activities, just highly involved . . . "When do I just take time for myself?" And some of them become disenchanting to an extent like, "Okay where am I? Who am I? What should I be doing right now?" And I've dealt with that with a few of them. They get tired because they are the smart kids.

Like Skye, Heather described working with gifted students who were overly challenged:

Usually the conversation starts with someone dissolving into tears. They come in and they say "I'm doing too much stuff and I can't handle it." One of our top seniors said to me a couple of weeks ago, "I feel somebody is pulling me in all directions."

Heather's students expressed concerns about trying to balance challenging academics and the extracurricular activities they needed for college applications. She said,

They find themselves stretched to the limit, doing a little bit more than they should be. They say they are looking for tips on how to organize everything from their school work to their evening schedules. A lot of them are in music, so they

want somebody to talk to about how to pass [their classes] . . . like, “I have seven AP classes and still am a member of two bands and three choirs.”

In essence Heather’s students were asking about a healthy balance between class work and extracurricular activities. The school counselors who reported working with students with similar concerns also reported helping those students develop positive coping skills, including setting reasonable goals, priorities, and expectations; making good decisions; and developing organization and stress management skills. Patricia stated that,

for a lot of them, they’re just in so many things they don’t know how to choose and prioritize because they want to be able to do everything. Sometimes they get themselves overworked and stretched out too thin. There are so many extracurricular activities. Sometimes the academic things slide a little bit because they are involved in so many things.

Heather echoed a similar sentiment when she explained that she worked with students on issues balancing obligations and self-care, including healthy rest and eating habits:

Because they are such high-functioning students, it is really so much about them trying to balance everything. We talk a lot about balancing, because they are good in everything. Everything they try, they are good at; so they come in and they’re looking for a way to continue to be in all of their activities and take their classes, and nurture all of their interests, and yet still be healthy people. That comes in the form of wanting to be organized. And sometimes that means, “Well I don’t get dinner until 11:30 pm,” so we talk about, “Well, okay, you should probably get this many hours of sleep and be sure that you are eating.” In some cases it comes full circle. It comes back to the basics of how do you do all the things that you do and still take care of yourself?

On occasion, the struggle between students and educational environment yielded outcomes that were too complex for the school counselor to handle on his or her own. Sarah described a

gifted student who would benefit from a referral to mental health services:

he's just very depressed by not doing as well as he had hoped . . . very anxious and nervous with what's going on with everything in high school . . . but I have referred him to a counselor because he is convinced that he's had some concentration issues . . . He was describing not being able to concentrate—things along those lines. I asked him if he had ever been tested for ADD, and he said "No, but my sister has," and so he went home and he asked his mom if he could get tested.

In this case, Sarah had not only helped her gifted student find an outlet and resource for his feelings of anxiety and depression, but also had put him on the path to identifying a possible learning disability. Skye had a similar experience with one of her gifted students. Although the student was highly intelligent, he was struggling with life issues that had a negative impact on his academic functioning. For Skye, this experience was an eye-opener; she reported that she had no idea that a gifted student could also be academically at-risk:

One student in particular that I've worked with the last 2 years—he's not with us anymore, but he still calls and we still try to help him out. He was off the charts. When you speak with this kid . . . it was amazing the conversations you could have . . . but the mental health aspect was huge. He wasn't very healthy. I felt terrible . . . we actually referred [him] on to our alternative school . . . the whole thing was he was dealing with divorce, he was under a lot of pressure, his motivation was not there. There was a lot going on in his life so he was also sorting through his own mind, and he was suffering from depression . . . he did drop out. He had so much going for him . . . absolutely off-the-charts intelligent, but no one really noticed that this kid was at risk until it was too late.

Beliefs and Philosophy

What a gardener knows or believes about a plant generally drives what he or she does to take care of it. In most cases, how participating school counselors served their gifted students was entwined closely with what they believed to be true about gifted students, gifted education, and the term *gifted* in general. There were several facets to the school counselors' beliefs. However, the overarching belief that many participants shared was that gifted students have different needs that require accommodation and differentiation of services.

Cindy observed that gifted students

may have needs for being challenged. Just like a student with an IEP needs similar learning support. You can't just leave them because they can learn the material in class. You just can't leave them hanging, where they're not challenged in the classroom.

Patricia stated her belief similarly:

It's kind of like working with special education, working with the talented and gifted. I would like to make more accommodations for them if I could because their needs are just different than other people's....And I try to work with parents in a way that I can because their needs are just not the same. They're just as different as special education students, just on a different spectrum. You need to make exceptions for them.

Polly also likened her conceptualization of giftedness to that of a student with special needs:

I guess a lot of times I use the analogy of a student with a disability. A student with a disability has specific needs which require help to get them to their [*sic*] potential. And those needs vary based on a disability. There is a federal law that says that we need to meet their needs. To me that bottom third percentile and the top third percentile are very comparable. They both have different needs, and often [the needs] cannot be met [in the] classroom. So I use that analogy to explain that this is what we do for

students who are at risk. We should also do it for students [for whom] the classrooms aren't meeting their needs.

Some school counselors in this study believed that because gifted students were unique, they required guidance and should have support available to them. Patricia said that this need for guidance and support is what motivated her to choose counseling as a career: "So that's when I became the TAG counselor. What students needed was guidance, preparing them for what happens after high school—so that's when they brought me in." Heather explained that her counseling was rooted in the belief that "it is sometimes a challenge to help these kids to see that they're not superhuman; and they shouldn't have to be."

The beliefs of school counselors participating in this study sometimes ran contrary to the beliefs of other educational personnel or school district culture and climate. Skye remarked that a philosophy in her building was that, because gifted students were smart, they did not need support or guidance:

And the teachers will sometimes assume, "Well, the student is smart; they [*sic*] can do it on their own." And you miss the steps where they are just kids, and they still need some extra help. But you know a lot of teachers wouldn't think that a gifted student would need that. I just think that too often we just have our perceptions about giftedness.

Dale stated, "I think that sometimes teachers, and possibly some counselors, because they get the kids that are so bright and capable on their own, we just kind of forget about them and say that they can handle it on their own and don't do anything special for them all."

When Polly tried to point out to teachers reasons for underachievement in classrooms stemming from a lack of academic rigor, she also encountered the belief that gifted students had to be straight-A or high-achieving students. She described educator resistance to the idea that gifted students should be given a chance to try a more challenging curriculum if they were not

able to demonstrate, with superior grades, that they could handle the changes. Polly said,

I think one of the reasons why the kids become complacent in the classroom . . . It's not exciting, it's not where they need to be. There's no challenge. So I really believe that they should have the opportunity to get into the program. Some people are really against that because they believe that it looks bad if they try it and are not successful. That it's not worth a try if they can't cut it.

Heather reflected on a major philosophical conflict in her school: that the social and emotional needs and life skills of the students were either not being met or were placed as a less important priority than academic achievement. This conflict often was demonstrated in difficulties with services and programs such as a "Life After High School" panel. Heather reported as follows:

Several of our AP teachers are of the belief that the smart kids don't need it, so we had very poor attendance [at the "Life After High School" panel] from what I would consider to be our gifted students. This year, many of our gifted students didn't even get the information that part of the panel information was to be tailored for them because the AP teachers wanted results on the test. Basically they said that the students being in the classes was more important than getting the other material. So we lost out in a huge way.

Skye had a similar conflict between her beliefs and the school climate. In this case, the life skills gifted students needed to know in order to function after high school were not being taught due largely to the lack of balance between advanced coursework and courses that would teach the life skills:

There is so much emphasis on the really difficult academics that more often than not these kids walk out of here not knowing the basics of how to get by in the real world. Like how to balance a checkbook or anything about insurance. They max out credit cards. They don't understand what interest rates are. There's no time in their world to sit down

. . . But I think that there is so much focus on taking really tough classes and doing really well in all of your activities and all that other stuff, but the basics are really forgotten. The life skills are something that these kids need to know every bit as much as every other kid. . . . It just doesn't fit into any curriculum, so by the time they get to high school they are taking AP calculus and stuff like that, too. A basic writing class or a health class is not mandated so it is forgotten.

Identification and Services

Just as a gardener must determine what type of plant he or she is working with and what types of food or amount of direct sunlight will be needed for growth, the services school counselors in this study provided for their gifted students were directly tied to the identification of the gifted students' needs and functioning. Initially, school counselors reported trying to determine who the gifted student was and what he or she needed. They accomplished this through testing and assessment, Child Study and/or IEP team meetings, referrals to outside sources for additional testing, and educating others in the building about how to identify gifted students. Patricia reported, "I think probably the best way of meeting their needs is the individual meetings with them: getting to know them, know what they're into."

Dale relied on written teacher reports and student journals as a way of identifying his gifted students' needs: "If there is anything that they [the students] needed help with, they could just write it down and turn it into me. They would notify me that they [the students] were having problems so that I could contact them. We used it as a referral." In addition, Dale utilized team meetings:

There's gifted music, there's gifted art, there's debate, there's leadership. There was a different teacher in charge of each of those things. We would meet once a month just to talk about our programs, and how things are going. We would talk about it as we have the same kids and so it became sort of a teaming. So we would talk to each other about "Oh! This student was really having problems in my group." "Oh! They

are having a problem with me, too.” “Oh, they’re having a problem here, too.” That acted as a referral for me.

Similarly, Polly worked a great deal with Child Study Teams:

A big part of what I do is be a part of the Child Study Team meetings. So when students are referred to Child Study Team meetings, are their needs being met or not being met in a classroom? For instance, this year our Child Study Team meetings have met for three students, and we have used the Iowa Acceleration Scale with all three of the students, and just kind of help identify what needs they might have said that we can better serve them.

In addition, Polly used assessment data to inform school administrators about gifted needs. “We use assessment tools to show how things are rather than just anecdotal kinds of information. We try to use assessment tools and data. We try to bring a lot of data to the table to show our school administrator that there is a need.”

Second, school counselors in this study facilitated positive growth in a variety of ways, such as academic planning, college and career exploration, individual and group counseling, and classroom guidance. Cindy described her classroom guidance interactions with gifted students:

I do have classroom guidance, and I do go through how to deal with emotions, study skills, and conflict management. I also do a lot with being tolerant of differences . . . in realizing that some people learn faster than others. Some people are better at certain subjects than others. So I really stress the tolerance on that. So that if gifted students may not understand how other people struggle with [a subject].

Polly reflected on her small groups.

I’ve had a variety. I first started my school counseling program. It [gifted] was one population I really wanted to serve because it was a personal interest of mine. So I started doing a yearly group for gifted and talented students just to talk about gifted issues that they are facing . . . So these fourth-

grade students . . . we would meet for about four to six weeks during the year and we just talked about issues that they were having.

Dale developed his own small-group curriculum for gifted students focusing on self-exploration and an appreciation of others' strengths and talents: "We talk about 'Gee, I do it this way; you do it the other way. I'm good at this; you're good at that. And this is all okay.'"

Heather described an example of working with a gifted senior with his college choices and his feelings of high expectations from different sources:

One of my top seniors came in and he went to two of his three college choices and couldn't decide whether or not to go to the third one. He was feeling some pressure from his family in what way, and from his friends and other ways. "They're expecting me to go here, but I don't want to do what everybody expects me to do." So we kind of sat down, and I ended up giving him a sort of mini-assignment. "Forget about specific schools, I want you to tell me in any college what is the number one most important thing to you, the number two, and the number three and so on."

Several interactions and experiences school counselors described revealed how they went "above and beyond" their duties and responsibilities to give extra individualized attention to gifted students. Skye related the following:

One of my students I talked to yesterday . . . he's just not doing anything in class, he's on You-Tube, he's doing all this. But he is [gifted], though, because his test scores are very high . . . so we talked a little bit and he told me, "I just have this big project at home, but I keep forgetting to bring it." And I keep thinking, "That's it?" So I said, "Okay," and he asked me, "Will you e-mail me?" and I said, "I can do better than that!" So I called him yesterday morning at 7:00 on his cell phone and reminded him to bring his project.

School counselors also participated in mentoring, coaching, and extracurricular activities that allowed them additional interaction with gifted students. Skye said, “I work with Academic Decathlon students all the time because they’re frequently in the counseling office studying, and they’re such cool kids. And it’s really great because otherwise I wouldn’t get to know them.” Likewise, Dale reported being

involved in Future Problem Solving. I was also the wrestling coach, and a track coach, and cross country coach. I’m retired and still coaching. I found that it gave me a lot of chances to establish rapport with kids, and it seemed that if I would get rapport with a couple of those kids, then that helped establish rapport with others. Because they would say, “He is okay. Go ahead and talk to him.” I guess I would do everything I could to have contact with the kids, even when I didn’t have to.

Collaborative Relationships

A gardener may have to consult or collaborate with horticulturalists, arborists, or even master gardeners if they need additional expert opinion on a plant or a venue for strategizing how best to care for the plant or tree in their garden. The majority of services required school counselors who participated in this study to collaborate with several entities. Collaboration consistently helped school counselors identify needs of gifted students and serve them. Collaborators included other educators, such as the gifted educator or coordinator in their building or district, school psychologists, community agencies, and parents.

Sarah discussed her experiences collaborating with a gifted-education teacher in order to have gifted students placed in correct classes:

She really had to help me in terms of what all the gifted students needed. When I first started here, I was 9th through 12th [counselor], and so I did a lot with AP, and I was not familiar with that at all, and so she was a real help in that

aspect. And she generally will come over if we are having a scheduling concern. She will come over and, with me and the gifted student, work to satisfy the student.

Skye recalled working closely with her at-risk counselor and the district's alternative school in order to provide one of her gifted students what he needed:

And then we also work with our alternative school so if interventions we are putting in place in our school don't quite work, that's an option. For that student, that sort of schedule worked better for him, and he was able to have access to all the other resources that the alternative school could offer for him that we could not. So we sort of pooled together our resources to figure out through individual counseling, and setting up other meetings, and consultation how to best meet the needs of the student.

Polly said, "I think that consultation is just a part of my daily routine with most kids." She specifically worked around resource constraints that were creating obstacles to testing for gifted students:

Our ____ agency is not allowed to give ability testing for our first graders. They don't feel that a school psychologist should be used in that capacity. So I coordinated with the University of ____ school psychology program and a contact with Dr. A and Dr. B to bring in a couple of their school psych students to do this assessment, so they got training out of it and we got assessments.

Polly also formed partnerships with community agencies in order to provide gifted students with enrichment opportunities.

The kids were just under that or don't make it in—we also try to give them enrichment opportunities. For instance, we sent many children to what we call College for Kids. We refer children to the ____ Center for the ____ program, and ____ Community College has the program for the summer. Even for kids who simply aren't an ELP, we still try to give students the opportunity.

Participants also related their experiences with parents and the parent and guardian role in gifted students' learning. Cindy remarked that some concerns her gifted students had seemed to be reflected in the parents as well, especially issues of perfectionism:

I think that if the parents worked on helping them not be so perfectionistic it would help. I had a little bit of parent help, but the parent was a bit of a perfectionist, too, so it's modeled for them at home . . . it's a hard thing to change . . . I think the parents influence the kids' attitudes, and that makes a huge difference. It may be their personality, so it could be hard to counsel them [the student] or have them thinking differently about things like that.

Skye recounted several different experiences in working with parents of gifted students. In some instances, Skye encountered difficulties in collaborating with and communicating student needs to the parents:

The parents were obviously not on the same intellectual level as their child, and it caused a lot of problems, because they felt like their son or daughter was condescending, and they were also not able to fully grasp why their child was feeling the way that they were feeling.

On other occasions, Skye was met with a disconcerting lackadaisical attitude from parents when she attempted to discuss potential services and programs for gifted students: "Of course, I always get permission from the parents to do so, and most of the time the parents don't really care. They say, 'Yeah whatever. Do what you want.'" At times, these responses were the impetus for Skye to teach and foster positive communication skills in her students so that they could advocate for their needs to their parents: "Okay, how can we help you communicate your needs to your parents in a way that your parents can help? That they're going to understand where you're coming from?"

Patricia and Heather reported positive interactions and relationships with parents. Patricia stated, "At the beginning of the senior year I meet with the parents about what they're planning on doing. In general, I have a pretty established relationship with

most of the parents, so that we know each other and communicate with each other if there is a need.” Heather worked consistently with her junior and senior students and their parents to get the students ready for graduation and develop postsecondary plans:

When the students are juniors, we do have junior conferences. It’s a 1-hour sit-down with the student and parent. For students who are gifted there is a much different feel to these junior conferences. Basically we do them in the spring of their junior year and we say, ‘Okay, here is where you stand right now academically. Where do you want to be when you graduate? And how do we get you there?’

Heather was also proud of her successes at parent conferences: “And the parents are almost always happy. I’ve had over 100 junior conferences in 2 years and never had a parent not pleased with the time we spent together.”

Concerns and Constraints

As much as a gardener can prepare the garden and the individual plants for inclement weather, there is much that is beyond the gardener’s control, such as floods, sun scorch, or the ravaging of pests. School counselors who participated in this study, too, worked within the confines and constraints they encounter in their buildings and districts. Participants discussed experiences with time constraints, large student ratios, crises, and the push and pull of trying to fulfill multiple roles, all of which had impact on their services to gifted students.

Patricia discussed her difficulties in trying to find a balance of service for all of her students:

Well, like I said, I’ve been a TAG counselor for the past 5 or 6 years. . . . I’m also a special education counselor and the at-risk counselor too. Part of my job description is TAG. My job is funded at one third through TAG, one third through special education, and one third through at-risk. Sometimes I’m spread pretty thin.

Skye echoed similar concerns: “Time is a huge factor. Our case loads are just going to be astronomical next year. I’m looking at 475 students. So groups are something that we would love to do, and I think groups would be great especially for this population.” Polly described her struggle:

I think one thing that is still problematic in the school is just the triage. A lot of times there are kids that I would love to work with, gifted included, but the crisis situations are the things that get the attention of the school counselor rather than gifted students’ concerns about how they view the world differently.

Participants also acknowledged that sometimes the building or district did not or could not provide money, personnel, or other resources that would benefit the gifted student. Sarah lamented the amount of higher level classes available to her gifted students:

I see that I am not able to meet their needs right now because I see that I’m not able to give them the classes that they do need. . . . And I would say one of the biggest problems I run into, and they run into, is the fact that there are so few honors or upper level classes. We have quite a few, but the problem is that there are so few kids to take them that they’re not offered nearly as often as the middle or lower level classes. It’s very hard for us to set a schedule and with all the upper level classes that they would like to take because they’re only offered at certain times, because there’s only a handful of students that would take it. It seems to be the major problem, even as a freshman . . . I do see that their needs need to be better met by offering those upper level classes so that they’re not bored or not challenged. I feel that that’s my main concern, and those needs need to be met.

Polly recognized that gathering data on what gifted students needed might result in getting a gifted teacher with more time in her building. “This has been an exciting year in how we’ve been able to do the Iowa Acceleration Scale to show that we needed more time. Our ELP teacher at that point was a half-time position,

and we needed to increase her time to a three-quarters-time position so that she can serve . . . a higher level of service.”

Training and Knowledge

A gardener may have prepared for taking care of his or her own garden by observing and working alongside others; or he or she might have benefited by a basic gardening techniques manual. A gardener without these two sources of training might gain his or her learning about gardening through direct experience with the plants.

The school counselors in this study had had some formal training pertaining to the gifted population through modules embedded in other preparation classes. Heather and Dale reported gaining some information through career, theories, and internship classes, while Cindy received one module on gifted students while enrolled in a class on mainstreaming. Patricia also had classes regarding special learners, but reported receiving more training through outside reading, additional certifications, and state conferences. Polly, because she was pursuing her doctorate, had formal training that added to her teaching background. Skye, who participated in an online class on gifted education, still reported that the information did not necessarily prepare her to work with gifted students:

I took one class which was the introduction to gifted education with Dr. B online. And then I also just did my previous schooling in which I had, I believe, one class that stressed gifted students. I don't feel like I have a solid understanding or a solid education unless I go outside of school and read articles published by ____ Center or articles regarding gifted education. I really don't have a lot of background with gifted education. . . . But as far as training is concerned, I don't have a lot.

Sarah's learning about gifted students occurred on the job and through direct experience. “My knowledge is pretty much through working with students for the past 2 1/2 years. It's just a general knowledge . . . My experience has pretty much involved the

scheduling and testing of the gifted students.” Like Skye, Sarah believed that this was not enough:

I didn’t go through my master’s program that long ago, but I don’t feel like I was given enough information. We briefly touched on it, but we didn’t spend as much time on the gifted as we did on the special education or things along those lines. We just need more time to be able to go more in depth about what a gifted student needs.

Sarah’s preparation also led her to consider what training she would like to have had and what might benefit school counselors coming into the field:

During master’s—a course would be wonderful in gifted. But even if just part of a school counseling course that would be devoted to that, it would be beneficial. So just a little bit more understanding would be helpful. It would look similar to understanding the other students that I’m serving. It would look like: Here’s what a gifted student looks like in general, here’s what they may find that they need the counseling help with because they’re struggling at the freshman level, and here’s what you should be doing. And here’s a good referral and here are some things that are common. And here’s what not to do. Anything along those lines could give me an idea. Obviously there’s going to be that case that is not going to touch the general case of gifted students. But it would be nice to have a profile.

Cindy remarked that school counselors should be prepared to use more cognitive techniques to work with issues of perfectionism, while Heather thought they would have benefited from more knowledge about organizational techniques and asking more strategic and in-depth questions. Skye discussed her desire for a specific class on cultural and social issues of gifted education that would help her identify common counseling concerns and gifted students who might be at risk for academic failure and also allow her to be a more effective advocate for them. Polly felt strongly that master’s preparation in school counseling had to include

exposure for one. You can't really understand gifted students' needs until you work with them, and so just experiential learning. I think that when school counselors in training are in their practicum and internship, I don't think they often end up with the gifted students.

Patricia observed that similar training should also be available to teachers, which, if provided, might help the relationships between gifted students and teachers in the classroom:

I think that they have a class like the special learner . . . I think that learning the characteristics of and knowing what to expect from students . . . I know it's very frustrating for some teachers. They don't understand, they think that they [the gifted student] should behave in a certain way and don't understand when talented and gifted kids can't achieve. . . . So understanding characteristics and needs of gifted learners would be important and master's programming.

Sarah added that after school counselors have completed their programs and are out in the field, professional development is necessary. She said,

I know that in some districts school counselors meet monthly . . . and something like a training along those lines would be beneficial. I feel we need to be going into more depth. I would think that even the K-8 would need more, because that's when they're [gifted students] going to be identified.

Dale agreed and said that school counselors still had some things to learn in order

to have a lot of different kinds of tools in their bag to figure out how to approach the student. Certain different activities, approaches, different kinds of gimmicks that will draw some of those kids. Use them as a different kind of thing because they are bright and they can see through a lot of things that we do for the regular population.

Polly suggested that school counselors could share what they have learned about gifted students: "The people who know more

about that . . . like the school counselors at their training have that knowledge so they can bring that back with them to the school districts. School counselors can also do trainings on it.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to capture the experiences of school counselors in their work with gifted students in their building including their services, knowledge, and training. The seven school counselors represented a variety of school buildings and grade levels. School counselors reported experiences with typical gifted traits and characteristics that added a new dimension to their counseling relationship and determined how they would help and serve the gifted students in their building. Participants reported utilizing a variety of resources to identify specific needs of their gifted students, including teachers, parents, and student self-referral. A large number of counseling concerns that participants worked with stemmed from the interaction between the gifted student and the degree of challenge and academic rigor provided in the classroom and school. This finding resonates with the suggestion raised Robinson (2002) that many of the challenges gifted students face stem from their advanced development in some areas as well as their emotional regulation—in this case, the gifted students’ cognitive and emotional reactions to their learning environment.

In some cases, counselors helped their students by finding or facilitating the challenge gifted students needed. In others, school counselors worked with the student to help find a healthy personal balance between being overly challenged and allowing for self-care and the growth of personal identity. School counselors used several different methods to meet both types of needs, including individual academic and career counseling; group counseling; specific programs, panels, and enrichment opportunities designed for gifted students; collaboration with educational personnel in their buildings and districts; and the establishment of community partnerships. Their services and strategies match well with most of the roles and responsibilities outlined in ASCA’s position

statement on school counselors' involvement with gifted students (ASCA, 2003b) and fit into the four quadrants of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003a). Proud of her particular school counseling program and its service to gifted students, Heather said, "So I've kind of got over the entire ASCA model . . . academic, career, personal-social . . . there's something in each little piece for all of them."

However, with the array of services provided, school counselors experienced constraints such as time, problematic student-counselor ratios, crises, or a lack of resources, which had an impact on their work with gifted students. On occasion, school counselors encountered conflicts between their beliefs and philosophies and those of the building's culture and climate regarding gifted students, their needs, and necessary services. Although not suggested by any participant as a contributor, the conflict may have arisen due to a lack of awareness or understanding about the unique nature and needs of gifted students by other school personnel.

Participants themselves stated that they were not always prepared to work with some of the unique traits gifted students brought into the counseling forum. Participants would like to have seen additional training related to general gifted characteristics and development in their preparation program. They also provided suggestions for programs and services later in their own professional development, a finding that supports past studies' discoveries that school counselors were not traditionally trained in issues pertaining to high-ability or gifted learners (Peterson & Wachter Morris, 2005). Hence, a lack of training, awareness or skill affected what school counselors and other educational personnel believed about gifted students and how they served them (Carlson, 2004; Dockery, 2005; Earle, 1998).

Implications

Because of the qualitative nature of this study, it is impossible and inappropriate to claim generalizability of findings. Although findings from this study cannot and should not be generalized

to all school counselors working with all gifted students, it is possible to draw some implications from the findings of this study. First, school counselors are not currently being prepared to work effectively with gifted students as much as they could be. This lack of training has an impact on the level of school counselors' awareness and understanding of gifted traits, psychology, and needs, and the development of skills necessary to identify gifted students and implement interventions, programs, and services. A lack of training may also affect who school counselors seek out as collaborative allies, the partnerships they form, and if, and the way, they educate and train staff in their buildings and districts.

Participants' experiences suggest the need for earlier training in gifted education and psychology. Training could occur as early as the master's preparation and include at least one class in gifted education and psychology and supervised work with K-12 gifted learners in the practicum and internship classes. Students in school counseling program classes could benefit from exposure to the National Association for Gifted Children program guidelines for counseling and affective development and aligning these with the ASCA National Model. Current practitioners should receive professional development pertaining to the psychology of gifted learners and procedures for identifying them for programs. Collaborative training through state conferences or professional development opportunities for gifted educators and school counselors together can and should occur around topics such as scheduling and course offerings, testing, bibliotherapy, and group counseling.

Second, school counselors should be prepared to explore several outgrowths of gifted students' interaction with the learning environment. Examination of the educational "fit," discovery of individual values, and optimal learning and work environments can be facilitated through individual and group work. Exercises and activities pertaining to expectations, planning, scheduling, personal health, and life skills can be facilitated through the classroom, but should also be done in conjunction with parents and guardians.

Last, findings from this study argue for further research examining school counseling services provided to gifted

students. First, current training methods need to be assessed and effectiveness of master's programs and professional-development opportunities pertaining to gifted students needs to be established. Second, further qualitative work should be conducted to examine more closely counselor beliefs, their work with gifted students and their parents, as well as gifted students' perspectives of the same counseling work. Last, both gifted education and school counseling are in need of longitudinal research documenting student counseling needs and counseling services over time.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. First, although participating school counselors represented a range of service to K–12 gifted students, only seven school counselors participated in the study. Dale had retired; although he had considerable experience as a school counselor, the responses from a currently practicing middle school or junior high school counselor may have added depth and richness to the study. Researcher-conducted observations of the school counselors working with their gifted students and parents would also have been valuable. Because this study rested on a qualitative paradigm, findings should not be generalized beyond the participants and other school counselors in similar contexts and with similar professional backgrounds and training. School counselors with similar characteristics may hold similar beliefs and perceptions, or may have had similar experiences to those participating in this study.

Conclusion

School counseling can play an important part in the nurturing of talent in gifted students. However, due to limited research, not much is known about how school counselors work with gifted students and if their work is effective. This qualitative study examined seven school counselors' experiences with their gifted students in a variety of educational settings and grade

levels. Participants reported experiencing issues pertaining to identification and services, collaboration, academic challenge and rigor, and professional concerns and constraints. School counselors' experiences with gifted traits and attributes, their beliefs and philosophies regarding gifted students, and their training and knowledge about gifted students and their education and psychology intertwined with their relationships and counseling services with gifted students. Findings support literature that underscores the fact that challenges experienced by gifted students stem from their gifted traits and cognitive abilities (Robinson, 2002). Additional findings suggest that school counselors must be facile with a range of counseling skills, interventions, activities, resources, and referrals in order to best help their gifted students. School counselors would benefit from early and ongoing training pertaining to gifted education that could enable them to become stronger advocates of gifted students, to effectively work with school climates that may be hostile to gifted education, to engage in sustained collaborative relationships, and to competently train fellow school counselors in understanding their gifted students. In conclusion, given the necessary knowledge and skills, school counselors have the potential to nurture and care for budding, flowering, and developing gifted students in their care.

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Appendix A

Structured Open-Ended Interview Guide (SOIG)

1. Please describe your background and training in school counseling.
2. Please describe what training or knowledge you have regarding gifted students.
3. What, if any, experiences have you had working with gifted students?
4. What, if any, counseling needs have your gifted students had?
5. How, if at all, have you met those needs by yourself or your school counseling program?
6. Which, if any, of these roles and activities have you found to be beneficial and useful to your gifted students? Which have not been as successful?
7. Given what you have said about your experiences with gifted students, how do you understand these students and their needs?
8. Given what you have said about your work with gifted students, how do you understand what parts of counseling programs benefit them?
9. What, if anything, would you consider important counselor training and preparation regarding school counselors working with this population?

Appendix B

Written Question for Material Culture

What do you see as the primary needs of gifted students and how, if at all, can school counselors help meet those needs?