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Exploring Elementary School Counselor Self-Efficacy to Improve Graduate Training and Retention

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Abstract

The role of an elementary school counselor is vital to a school system. Still, school counselors' roles are often misunderstood, leading to underutilization of skills and ultimately leading to burnout. School counselor training programs are tasked to help future school counselors feel efficacy in their role. However, all school buildings are different; school building leadership can perceive the role differently. The purpose of this qualitative manuscript is to explore school counselors' perceptions of how self-efficacy is experienced and manifested in their profession and use these findings to make recommendations for counselors and counselor training to ensure preparedness for entering the profession and successful longevity in the job. Findings suggest that (a) quality in relationships, (b) trust and support of administration, and (c) freedom to define the role all contributed to self-efficacy. The hope is that this information can be used by graduate training programs to help build a foundation for their future school counseling graduate's success.

Keywords
school counseling, school counselor self-efficacy, school counseling graduate programs, training school counselors

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Introduction

The role of a school counselor is vital to the overall health of a school climate and its students (Trust, 2019), and much awareness exists of the need for school counselor expertise in mental health in schools post-COVID-19 (Zolopa et al., 2022). However, the actual role of an elementary school counselor within their individualized school can be somewhat ambiguous and challenging to define compared to their colleagues in other schools. Principals typically define the job descriptions of school counselors, and there is often confusion among administrators about how to use their expertise best (Amatea & Clark, 2015; Fye et al., 2017; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Lieberman, 2004), which can cause the school counselor to be assigned to tasks that take away from their optimal strengths and do not align with the roles of a School Counselor (ASCA, n.d.).

This confusion may cause school partners, like principals and teachers, to have vague perceptions, expectations, and understanding of the school counselor's role, usually leading to an underutilization of skills and knowledge because tasks are assigned that are not appropriate for school counselors (Edwards et al, 2014; Fye et al., 2020). The ambiguity that exists in the role can make training school counselors in graduate programs challenging, and research suggests that supervision during this time becomes vital for efficacy when entering the profession (Lambie et al., 2021). However, school counseling training programs typically consist of 45 graduate hours, during which other factors could be addressed to increase efficacy in the role. This manuscript explores school counselors' perceptions of how self-efficacy is experienced and manifested in their profession and uses these findings to make recommendations for school counselor training programs.

School Counselor Preparation Programs

Regarding content covered in school counselor training, most graduate programs are comprehensive in approach as dictated by accreditation standards (i.e. Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs: CACREP) and state education requirements. However, training for elementary school counselors can be challenging as the training focus varies between graduate programs and does not always match what happens in the school buildings (Konstram et al., 2015). With the 2003 standards for School Counseling, The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) helped to standardize the training for school counselors and set the expectations for implementation (ASCA, 2003; Fye et al., 2020). Elementary school counselors are trained to help promote a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students through various roles and duties. According to the ASCA (2012, 2019a) comprehensive guidance model, elementary school counselors should spend most of their time in responsive services and guidance lessons compared to the upper-grade levels.

For reasons such as regional location and student population, work for the elementary school counselor can look very different from school to school. In addition, school partners misunderstanding the role creates non-counseling duties for school counselors (Fye et al., 2020). This multifaceted role creates challenges for school counseling graduate programs in training. Many nuances of the profession can be learned through internships. However, not all students have

the ideal on-site supervision experience (Lambie et al., 2021). Emerging school counseling program graduates enter the field uncertain what to expect (Konstam et al., 2015). A lack of preparedness can lead to ineffectiveness in the position, a lack of job efficacy, and an increased chance for quick burnout (Bandura & Wood, 1989; Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Fye et al., 2020). This incongruence between graduate training and practice, combined with the ambiguous expectations of school partners, impacts efficacy in the position.

Job Efficacy as a School Counselor

Job efficacy is defined as the perceived sense that a person is doing their job effectively, and it can be related to things such as external evaluations (Bandura, 1977, 1994) and internalized feedback (Pajares, 2002). Efficacy by way of job feedback can be challenging to obtain because an elementary school counselor typically works alone in the building and is surrounded by faculty, staff, and administration that are more familiar with the paradigms associated with teaching and curriculum, not necessarily counseling (Lambie et al., 2021). Because of the confidential nature of the work, most staff lack knowledge of all that is involved in the school counselor role (Lieberman, 2004). Although ASCA defines the role and use of an elementary school counselor, research suggests the principal is the one in the building who defines the role of the school counselor- regardless of what ASCA or training would suggest (Lieberman, 2004). In addition, the principal is often the evaluator of the school counselor's job performance, and professional school counselors do not typically have supervision beyond graduate training (Bledsoe et al., 2018; Tang, 2020). Because of the ambiguity associated with the role, evaluations can sometimes hold little meaning for the school counselor regarding professional identity, as evaluations are more building-specific. This lack of adequate professional feedback can also lead to a decreased sense of counselor identity, a greater feeling of ambiguity in the role of the counselor (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005), and lower levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994; Bandura & Wood, 1989).

Research on increasing school counselor self-efficacy is limited (Bardoshi & Um, 2021; Brott & Myers, 1999; Tang, 2020). Brott and Myers (1999) suggest that a way to increase job efficacy and professional counselor identity is to provide opportunities for the elementary school counselor to network with other school counselors. Because elementary school counselors are sometimes isolated in their school buildings with enrollment numbers ranging from 300 to 800 students, leaving the building can be challenging. This time restraint leaves many school counselors with little opportunity for professional networking during the active school year, and typically, not much time is allotted by school districts to meet with other district-wide counselors. This lack of program time to network with other practicing school counselors can be very detrimental to the counselor's continued sense of identity and lead to a greater understanding of ambiguity in the role (Brott & Myers, 1999).

The Impact of Self-Efficacy on Job Satisfaction and Performance

The standards of practice are set by ASCA and disseminated through graduate training programs. However, principals in buildings frequently have limited knowledge of the standards, yet they are

the ones who will define the role of the school counselor (Edwards et al., 2014; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Lieberman, 2004). As per ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies (2019), elementary school counselors deliver services to students through four main components of direct service: classroom lessons, individual and group short-term counseling, responsive services, and system support. However, research suggests that administrative leaders do not always understand the distinctions of such services (ASCA, 2023; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Lieberman, 2004), and they lack awareness of what is classified as a "non-counseling" duty (ASCA, 2023). As per ASCA, non-counseling duties deter from the four main components associated with professional school counselor identity. This lack of distinction from principals can result in inappropriate job assignments and non-counseling-related tasks (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Burnham & Jackson, 2000) for elementary school counselors. Hence, personal capabilities are impeded, which affects the school counselors' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994). Self-efficacy in the workplace can also be affected by one's sense of support from administration and leadership positions (Bandura & Wood, 1989), affecting the overall school climate.

School climate is an integral factor in determining the satisfaction of its employees (Lieberman, 2004). According to previous research, a school climate that was supportive of the school counselor and demanded fewer non-counseling related task assignments was strongly related to high levels of self-efficacy for school counselors (Clemens et al., 2009; Mullen & Guitierrez, 2016; Sutton & Fall, 1995). School climate can also involve the overall sense of well-being within a school and the general satisfaction levels of faculty, staff, and students. Because school counselors are embedded into a school system on all levels, the position affords a unique opportunity to have a greater sense of the school's overall climate. Also, because of the nature of the role, school counselors must maintain constant communication with all school partners, especially the administration, for program needs and student advocacy (Perry et al., 2020). The importance of this collaboration is also embedded into the ASCA 2019 standards for planning and assessment. In addition, previous research (Sutton & Fall, 1995) suggests that a line of communication with school partners is vital to a school counselor's job. It also suggests that the quality and quantity of the exchanges between the school counselor and the school administrator positively contribute to the school counseling program (Clemens et. al, 2009; Sutton & Fall, 1995). Although embedded into the standards, the quantity and quality of interactions between administration and school counselors are sometimes limited due to the hectic nature of a school day, which can lead to many detrimental factors for self-efficacy in the job.

Role of Graduate Programs for Elementary School Counselors

Graduate training programs for school counselors are tasked with preparing future professional school counselors with all the components necessary to enter the job market. According to the ASCA standards for counselor educators (2018), graduate programs should provide orientation to the profession by covering ethical practices, professional values, helping skills work, the job (as a

whole), and current trends in education. However, the reality is that many things that happen within the school counselor's daily role are very challenging to train for within graduate programs beyond the internship experience (Konstam et al., 2015). As mentioned by Kozlowski and Huss (2013), training programs are not keeping up with the needs of today's school counselors. Further, as the role continues to evolve and change, clarity of school counselor identity in graduate programs will become vital to prevent school counselors from being utilized for inappropriate tasks. Then, elementary school counselor's jobs require an emphasis on social and emotional learning and more work in direct services related to classroom behaviors. However, the educational focus at the graduate level is broadly directed at all developmental levels associated with K-12. Because this model is most effective for job placements, graduate programs must emphasize the differences in job preparation and preparedness (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016).

Because the job of an elementary school counselor is valuable to the healthy functioning of a school system, exploring the contributing factors that create self-efficacy can be helpful in advocating for the profession and developing training models for future school counselors in counselor education training programs.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore the phenomenon of elementary school counselors' perceptions of how self-efficacy is experienced and manifested in their work. A relatively small proportion of the literature has explored the impact of self-efficacy on school counselors. The study findings will also provide implications for graduate school counseling training programs and retention strategies for school counselor career longevity. The research question that frames the study is: How do elementary school counselors experience and manifest self-efficacy in the school counseling profession?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study is a constructivist framework. Hatch (2002) described the constructivist paradigm as one in which reality is constructed through an individual's perspective and is experientially based. According to Hatch (2002), "constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their vantage points" (p.15). Because of the individualized nature of the work of a school counselor, self-efficacy in the workplace comes from factors that are more subjective and hidden within the context of the job and are constructed by their experiences (Bandura & Wood, 1989). When approaching this research question of exploring the factors that assist in a school counselor's experience of self-efficacy, the constructivist framework seems well suited to the internal and external workings that manifest the construct.

Using the overarching theoretical lens of constructivism, which is based on one's perspectives and experiences, the phenomenological approach, which includes the use of theory and data to guide the research, will be used to gain further insight into the nature of school counselor's experiencing of self-efficacy. According to Charmaz (2006), "Data form the foundation of our theory, and our

analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct" (p.2). An interactive model is provided to clarify the purpose of this research (See Appendix B). By beginning this research with a solid theoretical base for understanding the role ambiguity associated with a school counselor, the climate related to a school, as well as what constructs can influence self-efficacy in the workplace, it is the hope that the study will begin from a strong vantage point to be knowledgeable about the context of the data but with an awareness of the authors' sensitivities to the subject. However, the intention is to remain open to the process and not force preconceived knowledge and the pursuit of personal interest upon the data.

Methodology

This study explored elementary school counselors' perceptions of how self-efficacy is experienced and manifested in their work. Because the role of a school counselor is somewhat ambiguous depending on factors of the school system, the counselor's experience of self-efficacy is deemed a complicated phenomenon, and a qualitative approach is merited.

Researcher Positionality

Qualitative research uses researchers as primary instruments of data collection and analysis. Therefore, researchers must have adequate background knowledge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research team comprised three female faculty members in counselor education programs, including school and clinical mental health counseling. Each of the researchers has experience working in schools and training future school counselors. Before developing an interview protocol for this student, the researchers addressed their assumptions and experiences related to the critical points of this study.

Interview Protocol

The interview process for this study was semi-structured in that protocol questions were developed and used based on literature and personal experiences from the author. However, flexibility was provided to allow the participant to deviate from the protocol and explore further into information that was insightful and helpful to the research question. In the coding process, the data was analyzed to uncover significant themes and common patterns in thinking between the participants. The interviews ranged from 35 minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Collection

For this phenomenological study, data was collected via multiple methods. According to Maxwell (2013), using multiple data collection methods helps to ensure the information being used is accurate, provides differing aspects of the study, and helps to increase validity. In this study, most of the direct information gathered was from an interview with the school counselor. Maxwell (2013) states that interviewing is an excellent way to describe another's perspective on events, whereas observation allows the researcher to make inferences from that information. Then, indirect information was acquired through observation. In this sense, observation data was used to accent

and drive the interview and support (or contradict) the information provided, including direct and indirect data, which helped to create a richer, more detailed picture of the participants' experience of the studied construct. It allowed the researcher a better perspective of their reality.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were complete, the data was transcribed and coded. A constant comparable analysis ensued to reach a thematic saturation point for the information gathered. Field notes and observations were also created for each school counselor interviewed alongside the transcription. Then, the researcher debriefed the data findings with other school counselors and counselor educators who were knowledgeable about the material as a way of member-checking to assure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

Participants

Eight elementary school counselors from three local school districts in a small Midwestern town were selected for interviews for this study. The criteria for the participants included (a) working as a current school counselor in an elementary school and (b) having a school counseling license. All participants were full-time counselors in their building, except for one participant (P7), a full-time traveling counselor who split time at two schools (School 4 and School 7) due to higher enrollment numbers. The participants' prior experience ranged from a first-year school counselor to 18 years as a school counselor. Six of the eight participants were teachers before becoming a school counselor. Only one participant lacked a master's degree in counseling: this was in Social Work, and she took additional coursework to meet the educational requirements for school counseling licensure.

The participants served in schools that were primarily K-4. The average enrollment was 562 students, ranging from 316 to 819, and four of the seven buildings utilized a traveling (part-time) counselor. The seven schools varied dramatically, with the number of students identified as low-income or eligible for free and reduced lunch ranging from 18% to 92%. The schools also varied in the percentage of those with limited English proficiency, ranging from 2% to 79%.

Findings

This study aimed to explore the elementary school counselor's perception of how self-efficacy is manifested within the context of their workplace. Through the interview process, more information was discovered based on the subset research questions: (1) What factors are the most influential in the elementary counselor's experience of doing a good job? (2) To what degree does the level of administrative support relate to a school counselor's sense of self-efficacy? Through the process of coding, the themes that emerged in the interview process relating to those factors that were the most influential to the school counselor's self-efficacy included (a) quality relationships within the school setting, (b) trust and support from administration, and (c) freedom to define their roles and maximize work.

Quality Relationships Within the School Setting

Due to the unpredictability of the day-to-day activities of a counselor, the interviewees made it clear that the self-efficacy of their work is dependent upon sustained positive relationships with administrators, teachers, and parents. For all interviewed, relationships with other school agents regarding communication, collaboration, trust, and professional respect were paramount. This was particularly true for the relationships with the teachers. As stated by one participant:

> I try not to base my worth or you know what I believe. My values on feedback from teachers or, you know, other folks because then you are always looking for that external kind of reward, however, I feel like that this success of this program is based on external things. You know… teachers giving complements, teachers trusting you with their kids, and teachers making guidance a priority and staying in the room because they know the lesson is something they can implement after I leave. Those are the things that make me feel successful.

This finding suggests that having a positive working relationship with teachers was impactful, which entails a clear understanding of the role of the school counselor and a mutual understanding that all work is being done with the child's and the school's best interest in mind. It also showed that these school counselors wanted more quality interactions and time permitted for collaborative efforts that help foster and maintain a positive working relationship with teachers. Another theme that emerged was the need for communication and transparency: a school counselor and a teacher must have open lines of continuous communication and feedback for collaborative efforts. The results of this study showed that the relationships with their teachers had to be consistent and maintained throughout the semester to make the climate conducive to mutual respect and trust.

As stated by one counselor regarding her relationship with her teachers:

> Most teachers want what is successful for their kids, like all of us are afraid of being vulnerable, so if I reach out for help it looks like I cannot manage the situation. So, I have worked really hard in the last year and a half to not come across like, 'well let me float down on my cloud because I am the expert and save this child that you can't manage'. I feel like yes- by making myself approachable and willing to clean up vomit if that's what I need to do, then teachers see you as part of the team versus this separate entity that is coming judge or tell me how to manage my class.

Trust and Support from the Administration

Self-efficacy was also dependent on support and trust in their work within their building from other school partners. When asked about their "typical day" in uncovering the various roles assigned to their position, most interviewed were quick to laugh and explain that there is no such thing as a "typical" day. One counselor stated, "You never know what will greet you at the door- this could be a crying child, an angry parent, or a teacher in crisis." However, enduring support from the administration and teachers made the unpredictable elements that arose manageable. This sense of

support and the favorable climate of the school also seemed to impact their levels of engagement within the building. Common themes that emerged when considering counselor engagement were that regardless of the environment, these counselors are everywhere in the school (hallways, offices, classrooms, and at the front door greeting) and focused on being as visible as possible to all school partners (students, parents, teacher, staff, administration). However, counselors who felt less supported tended to be less inclined to contact administration, teachers, and staff for assistance. They also seemed to spend more time in their offices.

Administrative support of the guidance program and the counselor's working activities was an important component of the school counselor's sense of self-efficacy. However, it should be noted that many interviewees felt their administration lacked some understanding of their role as school counselors. Therefore, they felt that if their administration was not critical and placed them in leadership roles, they were trusted to do their job despite the perceived lack of understanding. As stated by one participant:

> I feel very, very fortunate that my principal doesn't make me feel like that… she has come in and does observations on my lessons, both announced and both as a walk-through- which I love because I love for her to see what I am doing. But I feel like she.. I have never felt like pressure that I am going to mess up. If I know she's coming for a formal evaluation, I make sure to get here early, look better, dress nice, have everything planned- but I have never stressed about it and felt like I was going to be in trouble or that I am doing something wrong. I have been very fortunate with all I have had- I have had 4 or 5 principals- and I have always felt that they were totally supportive and complementary. They make you want to work harder and do better because they are not on your case.

It was also interesting to note that only a few of the schools visited for interviews had a current working definition of the role of their school counselor, which made evaluations somewhat arbitrary and played into the importance of administrative trust. As stated by one counselor:

> I think a lot of it has to do too that a lot of people do not understand the counselor's role. For example, my evaluator did not know how to rate me on my evaluation, so I think, yes… they don't understand the role of the counselors a lot of times. Maybe they understand but they do not know how it all fits together as easily as they do for teachers. They haven't been in our role before. I know my evaluator had a hard time because he was like, 'I know I saw you do this and this is really great, but I don't know what it is or what it is called and I don't know how to rate you on your skills'. There are still a lot of discrepancies and vocabulary that we are working on.

This finding shows the importance of the relationship between the school counselor and their administration and relates to similar conclusions regarding the relationships needed with teachers. It shows that the relationship between the school counselor and administrator requires open communication, transparency, continuous feedback, and mutual professional respect.

Freedom to Define Their Roles and Maximize Work

For those counselors interviewed, the support and perceived levels of professional respect from the administration played a significant role in their ability to define their roles as counselors in their buildings and maximize work. The counselors who believed they had more ownership of their role definition within the school, often spoke more frequently of feeling like they were doing a good job. However, this was not the case for all. One counselor spoke about the difference in her school:

> It depends on who your principal is because, just to be honest, this year I feel like I am ancillary, like I do not matter as much. I feel like I am not considered in a leadership position, where for a few years I was considered a school leader, and now I am not. Which is, well, on some levels good, because I get to more small groups and work with kids more. But it's really strange where education is going. It's all about data and test scores and if you can't show that what you are doing is affecting test scores…It seems like they are putting all of their eggs into the data basket, which is great but you can make it look anyway you want to support your program and I think that when we are talking about the emotional well-being of children, how can you quantify that.

All of the counselors mentioned that their roles embody most of the four main ASCA components, such as guidance lessons, crisis management, and individual/ group meetings (responsive services) as would be suggested by ASCA in addition to various other tasks. However, a common theme seemed to be a very packed schedule- that often did not include lunch- and the feeling like there just was not enough time for everything. All discussed how they usually leave the day with "unfinished" business and a stack of paperwork.

For most, the multiplicity in roles and deviations away from best practices were not a big issue until a crisis or a more *pressing issue* presented. They also discussed their frustrations about how deviations from best practices for duties outside of the counseling roles typically took them away from time-sensitive issues such as phone calls, paperwork, and being available for student concerns. For these counselors, the time away from tasks adds to the pile of unfinished work. One counselor reported that she started keeping documentation on her daily activity not just to show accountability for her daily activity but also to remember what was left undone. As stated by one participant:

> I usually have a pile about this big with a running list of things I am trying to get accomplished. I used to make a list everyday and then I realized it never gets done so I just got a small little legal pad and I make a running list of stuff…And that's one of the things that I like and one of the things I struggle with. Feeling like I am accomplishing what I need to be accomplishing when sometimes you walk in the door and things go to hell in a hand basket. (p.8)

This data shows that school counselors must have a sense of time management and a mantra of flexibility regarding being on call to multitask and picking up a task later- or else perhaps living with constant guilt of not having enough time to complete everything needed in a *typical* day. This combination of unfinished work and uncertainty of direction led one counselor to ask, "Am I doing this right?" Such internalized feelings of doubt and lack of normalcy gauges could tie into a sense of self-efficacy.

Counselors' Perceptions of Their Own Self-Efficacy

When asked how they knew they were doing a good job, most interviewed took a moment to reflect on the question with a long pause. It was common amongst all that doing a good job comprised multiple components such as relationship with students, rapport with teachers, trust from administration, parental involvement, and school climate in general. In addition, all mentioned the necessary harder aspects of the job but contribute to self-efficacy in a complicated way. Such tasks involve assisting children and families in acquiring basic needs like shelter and food, identifying physical, sexual, and mental abuse, reporting abuse through hotline calls, and sometimes maintaining contact with local law enforcement/ resource officers. As stated by one counselor when reflecting on some of the more challenging but necessary aspects of the profession that contribute to doing her job well:

> I am just thinking about the hotlines, and how do you feel like you have done a good job with that. I don't know that I have ever felt as though I have done a "good job" with that. So it's a lot of little measures you have at the end of the day. Just because I wear so many hats that I guess that's feel enough. I got my hands wet. I jumped in and got my feet dirty..ya know.

Thematically, the need for support from administration and understanding from school partners for these more emotionally charged tasks emerged. Another counselor stated,

> How do I know after a hotline call that I have done a good job. It didn't feel good, per say, but I knew I had to do it. But sometimes I think that's all the teachers think I do.

This thematic impression shows the need for self-efficacy to thrive as a school counselor and that the school climate needs to be one of trust that the counselor can/ will do the required job and be supported in times of more emotionally taxing work. More opportunities for consultation, support, and professional networking with other school counselors could be beneficial to discuss the more challenging roles that are more commonplace for the school counselor's work.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore elementary school counselors' perceptions of how self-efficacy is experienced and manifested in their work. Being that research would suggest that self-efficacy is manifested from internal as well as external influences (Bandura, 1977, 1994; Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002) and the work of an elementary school counselor is ambiguous, it is important to

explore what factors and themes emerge when school counselors are asked the question "how do you know you are doing a good job." The discussion of findings will be organized in accordance with the study's research questions. In this study, the research questions addressed were: (R1) What factors are the most influential and assist in the elementary school counselor's experience of doing a good job and manifesting self-efficacy? and (R2) To what degree does the level of administrative support relate to a school counselor's sense of efficacy? The themes that emerged in the interview process relating to those questions that were the most influential to the school counselor's self-efficacy included (a) quality relationships within the school setting, (b) trust and support from administration, and (c) freedom to define their roles and maximize work. Future research could explore what can happen in graduate training that can help bolster such factors for new school counselors.

(R1) What factors are the most influential and assist in the elementary school counselor's experience of doing a good job and manifesting of self-efficacy?

Quality Relationships Within the School Setting & Trust and Support from Administration

The data demonstrated that the quality of the relationships within the school setting is essential. According to the ASCA (2015b), elementary school counselors are integral to an entire educational program because they engage in proactive leadership that involves all school partners to help students achieve academic success. Because the collaboration piece is so vital to the role of a school counselor, it stands to reason that the quality of the relationships between the school counselor and the involved school partners, such as teachers, students, and parents, would influence the counselor's sense of efficacy for their job. Also, because many administrators perceive the school counselor role to be one based on relationships and collaboration (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Curry & Bickmore, 2013), a counselor who struggles in this area may also experience poor evaluations from administration. In Amatea and Clark's (2005) study on administrators' conceptions of the work of school counselors, they found that administrators perceived elementary counselors as having specialized knowledge to work with the key adults in the students' lives to accomplish the needed goals for educational success. Although the relational aspect may be a perceived role of the school counselor, it is a multi-faceted area dependent on many external factors. Within the general need for positive relationships with those key school partners, such as teachers, children, administrators, and parents, are specific, more complicated layers that can assist in manifesting efficacy. The findings suggest that school counselors could benefit from a school-wide approach to securing relationships with school partners, specifically teachers and administrators.

Teachers. Interestingly, when speaking about the factors that help the school counselors to "know" their work is successful, all interviewed mentioned some form of trust in their teachers to work with their students. To those interviewed, this trust meant that their teachers indirectly supported their guidance program by allowing the students in their classrooms to participate. These counselors also felt they could be a part of a "collaborative team" if their teachers were willing to approach them with questions or concerns. In a sense, it seemed as though building and maintaining a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the teachers was vital, as they felt as

though they had access and opportunities to work with the students and maintain a climate conducive to doing the work.

Although the ASCA model (2019) addresses the need for communication with administration in the service area of management and does touch on collaboratively working with teachers in delivery, it does not speak in any detail about the need for establishing quality relationships with teachers. However, all counselors interviewed in this study discussed the need for trust, open communication, and transparency with their teachers and how they, as school counselors, worked hard to acquire and maintain those relationships. For them, the teachers played a large part in determining whether or not their role was successful.

Administrators. Another relational component that emerged from the school counselors interviewed was administrative trust. For the most part, those interviewed felt as though their administration was supportive and encouraging of their guidance program, and within that support, they felt that there was trust from the administration for the school counselor to implement their vision of the guidance program. Interestingly, for some, it seemed as though their administration was not fully understanding of their role, yet they "trusted" the school counselor to be doing her job. This supports Ponec and Brock's (2000) findings that an effective relationship between school counselors and principals must have an element of mutual trust that is based on frequent communication, visibility, and accessibility. Although many meetings between school counselors and principals happen informally (hallway chats, on the run, between meetings, lunch periods, etc.), connecting allows both parties to remain congruent on expectations and day-to-day functioning. It reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings or confusion.

In this study, a lack of understanding of the school counselor's role was evident in evaluations and feedback received from the school counselors from their administration. This finding supports the research that confusion does exist between school counselors and their principals (Curry & Bickmore, 2013; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Lieberman, 2004) and that education for administration on the role of the school counselor is merited (Leuwerke et al., 2009) and can be viewed as an opportunity for collaboration and teamwork (Ponec & Brock, 2000).

(R2) To what degree does the level of administrative support relate to a school counselor's sense of efficacy?

According to the school counselors interviewed, higher levels of administrative support in the form of trust corresponded with a clearer perception of doing a good job even if there was not much faith in the evaluation system. Some counselors felt as though their principals did not fully understand their role as school counselors. Therefore, they did not perceive their working evaluation as solid evidence that they were doing well. However, if they felt their administrator trusted them to do their job and gave them the support, freedom, and flexibility to manage the guidance program without too much critical feedback, they felt that was evidence that their work as a counselor was effective.

In summation to question R2, the counselors interviewed in this study reported a higher sense of efficacy if trust and support were present from their administration. Interestingly, many counselors

discussed that they felt as though their administrator was, in fact, supportive of their work yet lacked a complete understanding of what the role of a school counselor encompasses. So, to these school counselors, it seemed they did not see this lack of knowledge as a detriment to their work so long as their administrator was still supportive and "trusted" that they were doing their job. This finding contributes a new facet to the literature that merits further exploration.

A school counselor is trained to assist a school in creating an environment that supports social and emotional development. With so many aspects of the job playing into the counselor's idea of doing a "good job," the data of this study suggest that for these school counselors' self-efficacy is made up of many unique factors. These factors tie into the school's overall climate, quality relationships within the school setting, freedom to define their roles and maximize work, and trust and support from the administration. These results align with what past research suggests (Cervoni, 2007; Ernst, 2012), which means that these issues continue to be present in school systems for counselors. School counselors work closely with students, teachers, administrators, and parents. They are uniquely positioned within a school to observe and experience most, if not all, of the working components that make up the functioning building. Therefore, the importance of providing continued professional support that bolsters the counselor's sense of self-efficacy cannot be understated, and continuously seeking ways to improve the training of school counselors is of the utmost importance. It is also important to note where more advocacy for the profession is needed within school districts.

As reflected in the data, differences exist in the role of the school counselor from school to school, but many similarities exist. The work of a school counselor ultimately revolves around helping students, and often, an elementary school counselor is an isolated entity in their building. Through this research process, it was not uncommon for the counselors interviewed to mention the lack of time to complete tasks, the mounting pile of "to-do" lists, and the perpetual feeling that something is always left undone, but even amidst these feelings of being overwhelmed, they commonly love their work and believe in its purpose and impact. This underlying resilience and hope in an isolated position can be validated, strengthened, and empowered through collaboration and networking with other school counselors. This encouragement to network can be significantly assisted through school partners like principals and districts understanding the importance of networking and supporting counselors in having time away from their building to attend such meetings.

Implications to Graduate Training

For training programs, the data suggests that a strong sense of self-efficacy in the position stems from the working relationships between the school counselor and associated school partners within a school that embody a sense of respect and trust in the position. In training, this may mean creating more opportunities in an internship to collaborate with school partners under supervision and training on effective communication within a school environment. An example activity might include guided interviews with school partners as a requirement in the internship. Because graduate training coursework may not encompass everything needed to perform the role confidently, Tang (2022) suggests that supervision in graduate training should use school counseling-focused supervision with best practices to increase efficacy in practice. Tang found

that utilizing a supervision model focused on ASCA best practices and the National Model increased self-efficacy for school counselors. Additionally, such focused supervision can assist in establishing professional identity and bolstering confidence for handling situations that are school/ population specific.

Another focus is on bolstering school counselor identity and providing opportunities for training for advocacy in roles and positions. An example activity could include researching current events, topics, or issues in school counseling and writing an editorial or opinion statement in a blog or local media outlet (newspaper, online forum, etc.). Then, to address networking skills, training programs can encourage students early in their careers to become active and engaged members of professional organizations and develop a plan of resources and support when entering the workforce. Training programs will also need to work with their students to develop leadership skills and help them understand how quality relationships within the school setting, freedom to define their roles and maximize work, trust, and support from administration impact self-efficacy. Raising their awareness can help them prioritize these things when searching for a position and recognize concerns when the climate does not provide these areas.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore how elementary school counselors manifest self-efficacy in the workplace to inform the training of school counselors in graduate programs. The data suggested that job efficacy in the elementary school counselors interviewed emerged in four ways: in the quality of relationships with teachers and staff within the school setting, trust and support of administration, and freedom of schedule.

The findings of this study demonstrate the need for counselors to have control over their comprehensive school counseling program to facilitate relationships that impact the work and to have administrative support and trust in the job. This information also suggests that school counselor graduate programs can focus training on building healthy working relationships with school partners and bolstering professional identity for advocacy in roles. Another suggestion that would impact school partners' influence on school counselor self-efficacy would be to promote the professional roles of a school counselor in teacher training programs and graduate programs in educational leadership. This approach would assist in helping all influential school partners in the building to have a general understanding of the appropriate roles and uses of the school counselor and how to use them effectively.

Because the role of a school counselor is highly multifaceted, this study can illuminate some of the areas of importance in a school counselor's self-efficacy and help bring awareness to all associated school partners to prevent burnout and maximize the position's effectiveness. It is hoped that such information can be used to inform the current practice of school counselors and the training of future school partners.

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