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School Counselors and Leadership: A Study of Leadership from School Counselors' Experiences

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.2.1.5><https://www.williamwoods.edu/academics/mje>**Valerie G. Couture, Ph.D., LPC-S, NCC****Odunola Oyeniyi, Ph.D.****Erin O. Shaw, Ed.D.****Charlotte Parham, Ed.D.****Abstract**

School counselors serve as leaders and advocates within their schools in collaboration with school administrators to increase the achievement of students. The acceptance of school counselors as leaders within the school setting varies based on the school culture that has been created by administrators, teachers, counselors, and other staff. There is a gap in the academic literature on the topic of school counseling and leadership. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to increase understanding of the experiences of school counselors in schools as they take on leadership roles. The results revealed diverse experiences of leadership in the school counselors' schools, their role fulfillment, and their perspectives on the culture in their respective schools.

Keywords: School Counselor, Leadership, Collaboration, Administration, Stakeholders**Corresponding Author:**

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Introduction

School leadership has traditionally been conceptualized as the domain of administrators—principals, assistant principals, and superintendents—yet research increasingly recognizes the importance of distributed leadership models that engage multiple stakeholders in educational settings (Harris et al., 2013; Sachar, 2025). Within these evolving leadership frameworks, school counselors occupy a unique position that bridges administrative, instructional, and student support domains. The American School Counselor Association's national model explicitly positions counselors as leaders, advocates, collaborators, and systemic change agents (ASCA, 2019), acknowledging their potential to influence school decision-making and climate beyond traditional counseling roles. Despite this recognition, research examining how school counselors enact leadership responsibilities remains limited (Janson et al., 2009; Mason & McMahon, 2009; Robinson et al., 2018). This gap is particularly significant given the complex challenges facing contemporary schools, including student mental health concerns, achievement gaps, college and career readiness, and school safety, which demand collaborative leadership approaches that leverage the expertise of various school professionals.

Leadership is an integral component of an organization's structure. Organizational structure refers to the formal hierarchy of managerial roles and responsibilities. It defines organizational charts and how tasks are delegated and completed. The leadership of an organization impacts organizational structure. Impacting an organization's success, stability, and relevancy, leadership is crucial in creating a cohesive and effective organizational structure that achieves organizational goals and objectives (Bolman & Deal, 2021). A leader sets the vision and mission of the organization and creates an environment that encourages innovation and progression. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2017), authority and leadership differ. Formal institutional roles give you position and authority, but it does not mean you have leadership that influences others' behavior to work toward a shared vision and goal. The leadership style someone in authority selects directly impacts their influence, the effectiveness of a leader, and the organization's health. A leader can choose many leadership styles with a well-designed structure promoting success. An effective leader will reflect on their leadership style and implement a style that works with the organization's team to create a well-designed structure that enhances efficiency, promotes collaboration, and fosters success.

This study aimed to increase understanding of how professional school counselors work as leaders in their K-12 schools. Our overarching research question was: In what ways are school counselors involved in school leadership roles? To establish a theoretical foundation for examining counselor leadership, we first review school counselors and leadership and introduce three prominent leadership frameworks—distributive, collaborative, and shared leadership as opportune partnerships for administrators to include school counselors in areas of leadership.

School Counselors and Leadership

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defines school counselors as educators who develop student success for all students by executing a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2021). School counselors' responsibilities today go far beyond ASCA's definition (Havlik et al., 2019). School counselors are academic planners, change agents, advocates, and data analysts. They are leaders who innovatively find ways to meet the diverse needs of the entire student in a fast, ever-changing society

(Dixon, 2021; Hajjaji, 2021; Hines et al., 2020).

The role of a school counselor and leader often intersects in many meaningful ways. Both are focused on promoting the well-being of students, helping them navigate personal challenges, and fostering an environment that supports their academic and personal growth (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022). School counselors work closely with students, helping them manage academic pressures, personal issues, and mental health challenges. They provide individual and group counseling, career advice, and support with personal development. Leadership within a school, whether from principals, assistant principals, or teacher leaders, plays a role in shaping the environment in which counselors can best serve students. Strong leadership ensures the counseling department has the resources, support, and visibility to reach students effectively (Holcomb-McCoy, 2021). School counselors and leadership are partners in creating a supportive, effective, and positive student environment. Leadership empowers counselors to do their work effectively, while counselors ensure students' emotional and psychological needs are met, leading to overall student success (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021).

Distributive Leadership

Distributive leadership in the school's context is primarily used to describe a broadly disseminated pattern of leadership operating throughout a school and school community, the organization being led collaboratively by many participants rather than by a single authoritative being with the power of delegation (Collins & Hansen, 2011). The central premise is that good leadership is foundational to good learning and teaching practice (McInerney, 2003). In a school setting, distributive leadership coheres with this horizontal model but also carries more layered connotations, focusing upon the academic sharing of knowledge, practice, and reflection (Baştea et al., 2023; Karkkainen, 2000). Identified characteristics of distributive leadership include building trust, creating a learning culture, and sharing and disseminating information (Woods, 2004). Distributive leadership does not seek to remove formal leadership structures. However, it assumes that a relationship exists between vertical and lateral leadership processes and that leadership focuses on their interaction (Hargreaves, 2014). Principals, counselors, librarians, and teachers are important in fostering organizational conditions and climate for distributive leadership to flourish (Harris et al., 2013). This means that principals must be able to redistribute power and authority, distribute leadership, and support counselors, librarians, and teachers (Jones & Harris, 2014).

Distributive leadership requires school administrators to establish and sustain a collaborative school culture (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008) and promote trust relationships (Harris et al., 2013). Principals can use the distributive approach to enhance and sustain leadership by institutionalizing a leadership-centered school culture. Leadership from the distributive perspective does not focus on the position of individuals in a hierarchical organization but on leadership as a collective activity (Woods, 2004). Yukl et al. (2002) highlight that good leaders develop leaders at other levels for the system's future. In this context, the principal is seen as a leader of leaders (Jones & Harris, 2014). Distributed leadership is an important component of and contributes to improved organizational outcomes. While there are inevitably differences in the nature, quality, and extent of distributed leadership from one school to another, it is still within the amalgam of factors contributing to high performance (Leithwood et al., 2009). The research evidence also indicates that certain forms of distributed leadership have a modest but significant indirect effect on student achievement (Baştea et al., 2023; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; McInerney, 2003).

Collaborative Leadership

School leaders are under pressure to transform failing schools and provide a platform for continuous improvement for all schools. Public pressure to hold students and schools to high standards determined by assessment results and political pressure to provide parents' choice and leadership accountability make the role of the principal challenging. Rubin (2009) explained that school leaders need help from others to meet the public and political pressures and provide leadership that will transform failing schools and ensure continuous improvement for all schools. Building and sustaining collaborative relationships with other agencies, institutions, and community groups is the only way educational leaders can accomplish the task of helping all students achieve (Rubin, 2009). To accomplish the necessary partnership, education leaders must implement collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership focuses on strategic schoolwide actions directed towards school improvement that are shared among the principal, teachers, librarians, counselors, administrators, and others (Heck & Hallinger, 2010). Collaborative leadership entailed using governance structures and organizational processes that encouraged broad participation in decision-making, empowered staff and students, and fostered shared accountability for student learning (Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008).

Educational leaders must engage in collaborative leadership within the school system and within the larger community to accomplish the partnerships needed to create optimal learning for students. Collaboration among leaders is essential to developing a collaborative environment in a school. The role of leaders in a school is to make decisions after gathering the information. An effective leader recognizes that collaboration assists with the process by providing accurate data for assessment. Involving educators encourages cooperation at every level of education and helps improve the impact of education on the students (Robinson et al., 2008). According to Leithwood et al. (2009), leaders today need an expanded repertoire of skills and a new mindset to succeed in a fast-paced, hectic, and highly competitive work environment. Leaders must think strategically in a global context, articulate an inspiring vision across cultures, and make wise choices amid complexity and uncertainty (Heck & Hallinger, 2010).

Shared Leadership

There is strong evidence that positive and negative impacts of school leadership affect all aspects of schools, including school culture and organization, teaching quality, and student learning and achievement (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2010). Research on teacher job satisfaction has shown that shared leadership practices strongly predict individual job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Pietsch et al., 2019). Individual job satisfaction and organizational commitment for school faculty, staff, and administration are important for schools to continue to make positive changes at all levels of schools (Pietsch et al., 2019). Most definitions of the shared leadership model require role expansion for various stakeholders in order for leadership to be equitably spread (Ishimaru, 2013). Ishimaru (2013, p. 7) wrote that in the shared leadership model, "although the person with formal authority is no longer the singular source of expertise and agency, she or he retains a critical role in shared leadership approaches."

Most of the literature on shared leadership focuses on principals and teachers working together, leaving out the broader notion of school community, including school counselors, library media specialists, support staff, parents, and community members (Giles, 2006). In shared leadership, the principal creates school organizational structures that allow various personnel to expand their roles (Ishimaru, 2013). With this

expansion of roles, opportunity is created for leadership development and collaborative conversations, which build shared visions within the school (James et al., 2007). Strong relationships between schools, community, and parents are crucial to the shared leadership model, and research has shown these strong relationships improve student achievement (Ishimaru, 2013).

Methods

After gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we sent a solicitation email via a state-specific school counselor association listserv. Access to the association listserv was available through the first and second authors, members of the state-based association. Solicitation involved emailing association members outlining the study and including a survey link. The survey included questions to explore the school counselors' leadership experiences. We also used the state department of education website, which housed the email addresses for all school counselors. We emailed the prospective participants an invitation to the study, which included a description and a link to the survey. This study aimed to understand better how K-12 school counselors work as school leaders in their respective schools. Our overarching research question was: In what ways are school counselors involved in school leadership roles?

To further explore this topic of research, we developed the following guiding research questions:

1. How are your leadership contributions valued in the school?
2. Describe how you fulfill your current school counseling role.
3. How would you describe your school's climate?

Researcher Positionality

The researchers' and the participants' lenses interacted to understand the participants' experiences as leaders in school counseling. The researchers are faculty members in an educational leadership department with three distinct programs: School Counseling, Educational Leadership, and School Library Media Specialist. All four researchers identify as cisgender middle-class females. Two of the researchers are European-American, one is African-American, and one is Nigerian. The researchers have diverse experiences working in schools in the following roles: counselor, principal, librarian, and teacher.

Trustworthiness Procedure

Following the best qualitative research practices, the researchers engaged in several techniques to ensure trustworthiness. Expert external reviewers in educational leadership and qualitative research reviewed the survey details to ensure the survey included relevant questions. The survey data was gathered anonymously, so member checking was not completed. Saturation was reached with 90 participants who fully completed the survey.

Participants

The 90 school counselors who completed our survey were recruited from the southern region of the United States. The participants' age range was from 25 to 65 years old, and they had an average of 18 years ($SD = 10$) of experience in K-12 education. Most participants were females (99%), with the remaining 1% being males. The racial/ethnicity breakdown of the participants included: the majority (83%) were Caucasian, 15% were African-American, .01% were Native American, and .01% were two or more races/ethnicities. The breakdown in the grade level of the school buildings included: K-12 schools (8%), elementary schools

(34.5%), middle/junior high schools (23.5%), high schools (28%), and 6% were categorized as other (grades 7-12, or works in multiple buildings).

Instrument Development

After reviewing the available surveys relevant to school leadership, we decided to develop an instrument that focused on gaining the perspectives and practices of school counselors. While there is research on principles and leadership models, there was a gap in the literature that specifically focused on exploring how school counselors are included in the administrative leadership team. Our qualitative questions included free-response items that participants would be able to answer. Once we fine-tuned our survey, we piloted it with five school leader educators to establish validity. After piloting the survey, we edited the items by adding a few and eliminating ones irrelevant to the guiding research questions. Of the five educators, all concluded our survey was reliable for exploring leadership perspectives and practices.

Data Collection

Data collection took place online using the Qualtrics survey instrument. We collected data for eight weeks and included a reminder email at the midpoint. We sent the reminder email to both the state-specific school counselor association listserv and the school counselor emails found on the state department of education website.

Analysis

We chose to use phenomenology as a research method as we were trying to understand the school counselors' experiences of being leaders in their schools. A phenomenological framework describes the common meaning for several individuals of the same lived experience (Creswell, 2013). In phenomenological research, the researcher uses procedures for conducting a study that systematically collect data and analyze information (Creswell, 2013). In developing our qualitative response questions, we relied on our extensive professional background as school leader practitioners, our experiences as faculty teaching in an educational leadership studies department, and the knowledge gained through our literature review. Before we evaluated the responses, we created seven a priori codes based on our survey questions and pre-existing knowledge of school leadership practices (see Table 1 for a representative subset). We were also open to emergent codes.

Table 1

A Representative Subset of Themes and a Priori Codes Generated for Analysis

Themes	Codes
Inappropriate Duties	Data entry, lunchroom management, car rider duty
Faculty/Staff Turnover	Retention issues, new staff
Communication Difficulties	Wrong phone numbers, lack of internet
Positive Principal Support	Supportive leadership, understanding of priorities
Lack of Principal Support	Dismissive leadership, Lack of awareness
Lack of Collaborative Leadership	Not inclusive of counselors and other school staff
Counselor Leadership Contributions	Undervaluation leads to reduced contributions.

The seven a priori codes included (a) inappropriate duties, (b) faculty/staff turnover, (c) communication difficulties, (d) positive principal support, (e) lack of principal support, (f) lack of collaborative leadership, and (g) school counselor leadership contributions. We used these codes as the first two researchers reviewed the data. Participant responses that matched the a priori codes were organized so we could see the patterns in the data. To establish trustworthiness with our analysis, the first and second authors coded several responses and discussed our interpretations. We then separately coded a subset of responses, compared our results, and resolved any variations in coding. We followed this analysis until we achieved an intercoder consistency, Cohen's kappa, greater than .80, indicating an acceptable coding consistency level (McHugh, 2012).

Results

The results reveal the school counselors' perspectives of their leadership experiences in their K-12 school settings, their role fulfillment, and their perspectives on the culture in their schools.

Research Question 1: Leadership Contributions

Our first guiding research question was, "*How are your leadership contributions valued in the school?*" We examined the coded responses, which illuminated multiple ways the participants' leadership contributions are either valued or not valued in their schools. In Table 2, we present the coded themes, the frequency of the codes, and representative responses aligned with the codes.

Table 2

Coded Themes, Frequencies, and Representative Responses Aligned with Leadership Contributions

Coded Themes	N	Representative Responses
Overall Counselor Leadership Valued	66	I am frequently asked for my opinion. Advocacy for students is a priority. Staff and principal know the importance of my role. I am included in decisions.
Overall Counselor Leadership Not Valued	11	No, our principal likes to control everything. I have no opportunity for input into leadership positions. I get ignored.
Teachers Seek My Opinion	10	Teachers realize counselors see the big picture. I am an advocate for teachers. Teachers feel comfortable asking me questions.
Experience and Expertise are Valued	36	My tenure in the building, relationships, and willingness to work. Without me, so much would not get done. I am knowledgeable about the community, the students, and the school.

The majority of responses from the participants included positive examples of how their leadership contributions are valued. They “trust me,” from one participant highlighted the good relationships she has with the administration. “Advocacy for students is viewed as a priority,” was a response from another participant. Overall, the administration in most schools (n=66) appeared to prefer multiple opinions to be included when making leadership decisions. A minority of responses (n=11) indicate that the school administrators did not value the participants’ leadership contributions. “I am asked my thoughts and opinions, but they are not put into action,” was shared by a participant. Another participant offered, “I am split between two buildings, so I’m often out of the loop on things.” Similarly, another participant reported, “I have no opportunity for input into leadership decisions.” Most participants shared multiple ways that they feel their leadership contributions are valued in their schools.

Research Question 2: School Counselor Role Fulfillment

Our second guiding research question was, “*How have you fulfilled or not fulfilled your school counseling role as you thought you would while in your counselor preparation program?*” We again examined the coded responses, which illuminated multiple ways the participants worked in school counseling roles within their schools. In Table 3, we present the coded themes, the frequency of the codes, and representative responses aligned with the codes.

Table 3*Coded Themes, Frequencies, and Representative Responses aligned with Role Fulfillment*

Coded Themes	N	Representative Responses
Administrative/Data Entry/Paperwork	15	I didn't realize I would have so many administrative duties. Counselors are seen as secretaries until student behavior is out of control.
Broader Job Responsibilities	17	I am the only counselor in the building so I am put in charge of so much. I do jobs outside the scope of a school counselor.
Scheduling Issues	4	I get tied up with too many scheduling issues.
School Data & Testing	4	I help with testing. I am in a small school, so I track school data.

A minority of responses (n=32) from the participants indicated they have fulfilled their roles in the way they were prepared for in their counselor preparation program. One participant noted, "I feel the variety of classes I took helped me in this field, particularly practicum and internship." Similarly, it was reported, "You have a better idea of what you do day to day with the internship." Another participant reported, "Yes, however, there is a lot of on-the-job training and learning." Many participants (n=40) reported not fulfilling their school counseling role as they envisioned while in their counselor preparation program. "I have gone way beyond what I was trained to do," and "I didn't realize I would have so many administrative duties" were responses shared by participants. Overall, the participants had mixed work experiences with some of their work roles being ones they had envisioned when they were in graduate school, while others were outside their scope of practice.

Research Question 3: Climate of the School

Our third guiding research question was, "*How would you describe the climate of your school?*" Most participants (n=54) shared that their school had a positive school climate. In Table 4, we present the coded themes, the frequency of the codes, and representative responses aligned with the codes.

Table 4*Coded Themes, Frequencies, and Representative Responses Aligned with School Climate*

Coded Themes	N	Representative Responses
Overall Positive Climate	54	Administration is supportive of teachers and vice versa.
Overall Negative Climate	24	There are a number of staff who are extremely negative and try to undermine others.
High Teacher Turnover	6	We have high teacher turnover, especially when their voices aren't heard.

Participants noted “enthusiastic principals” and “energetic teachers” as being primarily responsible for the positive school climate. “We all try to work together for the betterment of the students,” was shared by a participant. “My entire staff contributes to a positive climate” was also noted. The team effort was crucial in creating a positive school climate. Of the participants who responded, a minority (n=24) reported a hostile school climate. Overwhelmingly, the reasons for the negative school climate included high teacher turnover, high principal turnover, poor discipline process, and lack of communication. “Most people do not feel like they have a voice. Staff meetings are quiet because nothing changes, so no one shares,” was shared by one participant. The high teacher and principal turnover was reported as having a negative effect on school climate. One participant responded, “We have had four principals in five years. The teacher turnover rate averages five new teachers a year.” A few participants noted that teachers have “problems with instructional facilitators, and it causes an ugly environment.”

Discussion

The goal of our research was to determine in what ways school counselors were involved in leadership roles within their schools. We recognize that school counselors have a variety of responsibilities within a school, and overall school leadership is historically left to the school administrators, such as the principal and vice principals. With the important current challenges that schools face, including school shootings, the effects of technology/social media, substance abuse, and broader mental health issues, the researchers predict that school counselors may be able to take on a larger leadership role within the school setting. School counselor education programs must infuse leadership training into graduate programs to increase school counselors’ abilities to lead and feel confident serving in a school leadership role. Using the leadership models previously shared, implications for how school counselors can be utilized within the leadership team are discussed.

Distributive Leadership

When reviewing our first research question, most participants shared multiple ways that they feel their leadership contributions are valued in their schools. Within a distributive leadership framework, school counselors have significant potential to act as leaders by leveraging their unique position and skill set. As Harris et al. (2013) noted, distributive leadership flourishes when principals redistribute power and provide support to other school professionals like counselors. Our findings indicate that many school counselors feel their experience and expertise are valued by administrators and teachers, providing a foundation for expanded leadership. School counselors could take on formal leadership roles in areas aligned with their expertise, such as heading student support teams, leading professional development on social-emotional learning, or coordinating college and career readiness initiatives. This aligns with the distributive leadership focus on sharing leadership across the organization rather than concentrating solely with administrators (Woods, 2004). Additionally, school counselors are well-positioned to build trust and create a learning culture through their relationships with students, families, and staff (Woods, 2004). Schools can more fully realize the benefits of distributive leadership by intentionally involving school counselors in schoolwide decision-making and empowering them to lead in their areas of expertise.

Collaborative Leadership

The results of our second research question showed the multiple ways school counselors collaborate within the schools to fulfill their school counseling role. School counselors can play a vital role as leaders in a collaborative leadership framework by facilitating cooperation and shared decision-making across the school community. As Heck and Hallinger (2010) described, collaborative leadership involves schoolwide actions toward improvement shared among various school professionals. Our findings show that many school counselors already feel their advocacy for students is viewed as a priority and that they are included in decisions, indicating a foundation for collaborative leadership. School counselors can enhance their leadership within this model by actively initiating and facilitating collaborative efforts, such as leading data-driven problem-solving teams, coordinating partnerships with community organizations, or spearheading schoolwide initiatives on bullying prevention or college readiness. Their unique perspective spanning academic, social-emotional, and career domains positions them well to identify areas for collaboration and bring diverse stakeholders together. Additionally, school counselors can model collaborative practices in their interactions with teachers, administrators, and families, reinforcing a school culture of shared responsibility and decision-making. By embracing these collaborative leadership roles, school counselors can contribute to the expanded repertoire of skills Leithwood et al. (2009) argued was necessary for effective school leadership in today's complex educational environment.

Shared Leadership

The third guiding research question asked about the climate of the school in which the participants worked. Results suggest a link between the school climate and the opportunities for shared leadership. Within a shared leadership framework, school counselors have unique opportunities to expand their leadership roles and contribute to a more equitable distribution of leadership across the school. As Ishimaru (2013) noted, shared leadership involves role expansion for various stakeholders, moving beyond the traditional focus on principals and teachers. Our findings indicate that many school counselors already feel their opinions are frequently asked and that they are included in decisions, providing a strong foundation for further leadership engagement. School counselors can take on expanded leadership roles by initiating and leading schoolwide college and career readiness programs, social-emotional learning, or family engagement. They can also play a crucial role in building strong relationships between schools, the community, and parents, which is crucial to the shared leadership model. Additionally, school counselors can contribute to developing a favorable climate that includes collaborative leadership by facilitating collaborative conversations and bringing their unique perspective on student needs and school climate. By actively embracing these leadership opportunities, school counselors can help create the organizational structures that Ishimaru (2013) describes as essential for shared leadership, where various personnel expand their roles to lead the school collectively.

Limitations

The first limitation of our study was that our data collection involved using a survey to gather qualitative data. The survey was anonymous, so we could not follow up with participants for clarification or explanations of responses. If we could have done follow-up questions, we would have had a more in-depth understanding. Another limitation of our survey was desirability bias. The researchers who sent out the survey all work for the same institution, with many school counseling graduates working in the region. The respondents may have wanted to respond in socially acceptable ways that may not reflect their feelings about their employment situation or their thoughts about their counselor preparation program. In future studies, researchers may want to cast a wider net to areas outside the region where their graduates tend to work.

Implications for Future Research

The data suggests that school counselors will have the opportunity to be leaders within their respective schools. The leadership opportunity will stem from positive working relationships between the school counselor, school administration, and teachers. Future research will help understand how workplace communication within a school setting can be used to increase trust and collaboration between school partners. Professional communication skills (written and verbal) will help future school counselors to establish themselves as leaders within the school setting.

Another area for future research is how graduate programs teach school counselors about leadership and self-advocacy. Oftentimes, school counselors know how to advocate on behalf of individual students. A gap in the literature exists on how school counselors can learn to advocate for themselves to be more likely to be given leadership opportunities in the schools. Future school counselors should develop leadership skills and know how their ability to communicate their training in diverse areas, such as building rapport

and trust, networking, collaboration, and organization, can be crucial to the success of schools. When school counselors feel confident in their leadership abilities, they will be more likely to contribute to the established school leadership team.

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