

Factors Influencing School Counselors' Perceived Effectiveness

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Abstract

School counselor credentialing requirements have been a continuous topic of discussion for counselor educators and credentialing bodies. Recent discussions include whether or not prior teaching experience is needed to be an effective counselor. The authors surveyed over 300 school counselors from states with varied credentialing standards and asked them to respond to questions regarding perceived counseling effectiveness, collective self-esteem, and previous teaching and school counseling experience. The results indicate the most significant predictors of school counselor perceived effectiveness are their experience in school counseling and their collective self-esteem with the school counseling profession. Implications for school counselor education are discussed.

Keywords: school counselor, credentials, teaching requirement, experience, effectiveness, school counselor education

Factors Influencing School Counselors' Perceived Effectiveness

Over the past 50 years, school counseling professionals have engaged in active dialogue regarding the professional identity and training of school counselors. A continuously debated issue among professionals is the requirement of previous teaching experience for school counselor certification. Approximately 23 states initially adopted credentialing plans that endorsed this requirement (Baker, 1994). Prior teaching was reputedly indispensable in spite of conflicting research (Percy, 1996). More recent literature (Peterson, Goodman, Keller, & McCauley, 2004) indicates both teachers and non-teachers face similar challenges in the first years of their school counseling experience.

Due to the extensive implications involved in school counselor certification, the nation's largest counseling associations (American Counseling Association [ACA], American School Counselor Association [ASCA], and the Association of Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES]) have since collaborated to bring uniformity to standards (Baker, 1994). Their intentions involved elevating the standards of practice for school counselors; achieving consistency among credentialing requirements; allowing for reciprocity across all states; and ultimately increasing the professional identity of all school counselors (Baker).

Certification Requirements

There are currently five states that require teaching experience as a prerequisite for school counseling certification (ASCA, 2007). These states include Alabama, Nebraska, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, and the District of Columbia. The above mentioned states typically call for two years of teaching experience before applicants

can receive school counselor certification. Kansas, Louisiana, and North Dakota require school counselors to be eligible for teacher certification, but do not indicate actual teaching experience as a requirement (ASCA). In contrast, several other states such as Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Wisconsin provide alternative options for school counseling criteria. These include supervised internships and other related work experience (ASCA). Although state control over credentialing may be considered a valuable asset by the states, portability of certification has become increasingly problematic for those in the field.

Teaching Experience

ASCA describes school counselors as "highly trained educators in pre K-12 settings who uphold ethical and professional standards to design, implement and manage comprehensive, developmental, results-based school counseling programs that promote and enhance student success" (ASCA, 2008, p. 1). This definition accentuates the strong connection between school counseling and education. Proponents of prior teaching experience argue that experience is necessary for effective school counselors to fully understand the school system and the environment in which they work (Hobson, Fox, & Swikert, 2000; Smith, Crutchfield, & Culbreath, 2001). They further purport that school counselors may not be fully accepted by teachers if they have not "walked the walk" and "talked the talk" (Burnham & Stansell, 2005; Hobson, Fox, & Swikert, 2000; Quarto 1999). One contention is that counselors without classroom teaching experience may not be as effective or comfortable in conducting classroom guidance (Bringman & Lee, 2008; Hobson, Fox, & Swikert, 2000).

In contrast, opponents contend that the prior teaching prerequisite may deter otherwise highly qualified candidates from entering the field (Bringman & Lee, 2008; Hobson, Fox, & Swikert, 2000). This argument, coupled with research that identified professionals with classroom teaching experience as having less favorable interviewing skills (Baker, 1994), adds to the overall discussion of whether or not prior classroom teaching experience is a necessity to being an effective school counselor.

Correspondingly, researchers have indicated constituents within schools also have differing views about the necessity of prior teaching experience. Olsen and Allen (1993) noted that principals and other school administrators saw no significant difference in the effectiveness of school counselors with and without teaching experience. In contrast, teachers seem to believe that school counselors with previous classroom teaching experience are most effective (Smith, Crutchfield, & Culbreth, 2001). School counselor educators are also divided on the issue (Hobson, Fox, & Swickert, 2000). When surveyed, 75% of those interviewed believed prior teaching experience to be unnecessary, and deficits could be remedied through school counselor training programs. The remaining 25% viewed prior teaching experience as vital to successful school counseling (Smith et al., 2001).

This dichotomous thinking is supported by Hobson, Fox, and Swikert (2000) in examining a shortage of school counselors in Michigan, found that there are two very different schools of thought regarding school counselors duties. One school postulates school counselors are first educators that provide limited mental health practices. The other school has adopted CACREP's emphasis that school counselors are primarily mental health professionals with specific training designed to work within a school

setting. Hobson et al. found that both schools are passionate about their viewpoints and often inflexible in their philosophy regarding school counselors.

Collective Identity as a Professional School Counselor

According to Butler and Constantine (2005), counselors' perceptions of themselves as members of the counseling profession (their collective self-esteem) can impact their competence as counselors and client-counselor relationships. School counselors' collective self-esteem, or collective identity, refers to their evaluations of and identification with the social group (e.g., the school counseling profession) to which they belong (Katz, Swindell, & Farrow, 2004). That is, collective self-esteem relates to how school counselors identify themselves in the school counseling profession (Crocker, Luhtanen, Baine, & Broadnax, 1994).

It is important to note that even though a school counselor obtains a professional position, the position alone may not help promote the school counselor's sense of collective identity (Gale & Austin, 2003). It is essential to identify professional school counselors' sense of collective identity within their profession. Collective identity directly relates to attitudes toward jobs and services offered to students (Brott & Myers, 1999). Recent research indicates collective identity is related to school counselors' relationship with clients and their feelings of personal accomplishment (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Yu, Lee, & Lee, 2007). Counselors experiencing a strong sense of collective identity are less likely to carry apathetic attitudes toward their clients even when they are dissatisfied with their jobs (Yu et al.). Alternatively, positive professional perceptions contribute to feelings of professional accomplishment (Butler & Constantine). Overall,

how one identifies oneself in the school counseling profession can be an important factor in understanding the effectiveness of school counselors.

Statement of the Problem

Although strides have been made to bring universality to credentialing standards, the need for more standardization exists. There is still some difference in opinion concerning prerequisites, particularly as it relates to the role of classroom teaching experience in the credentialing process. This discussion remains at the forefront of credentialing issues. It divides professionals within the field, and ultimately weakens the school counseling profession as a whole.

Given that only a few states currently require teaching experience prior to certification, and given the diversity among state requirements, the present research met an important need. Is prior teaching experience related to school counselors' perceived effectiveness. For the purpose of the study, researchers examined teaching experience, school counseling experience, and membership collective self-esteem as independent variables.

Method

Participants

Web-based surveys were sent to ASCA's regional representatives. Participants included practicing school counselors, both with and without teaching experience. Three hundred ninety-five professional school counselors from 16 states responded to the surveys. Ultimately 308 school counselors were included. Participants who did not complete demographic questions, such as years of teaching experience and school counseling experience, were not included. Of the 308 respondents, 42 were male

(13.3%) and 266 (86.6%) female. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 70 years, with an average age of 46. Participants were predominantly Caucasian ($n = 284$, 91.9%), African American ($n = 17$, 5.2%), Hispanic ($n = 5$, 1.3%), and Asian ($n = 2$, 0.6%).

In addition, the counselor to student ratio was 347.73, with standard deviation 146.54. The average student to counselor ratio at each level was 387.77 ($n = 111$, $SD = 150.99$) for elementary school, 343.18 ($n = 109$, $SD = 132.46$) for middle school, and 322.35 ($n = 109$, $SD = 149.34$) for high school. School counselors received supervision on an average of 1.38 hours per month ($SD = 0.80$). Currently, 94 (35.5%) school counselors work in elementary schools, 71 (26.8%) in middle schools, and 100 (32.5%) in high school settings. The remaining 43 (13.9%) indicated they worked in private or alternate settings with a variety of grade levels.

Criterion Variable

The researchers developed a school counselor perceived effectiveness questionnaire to assess counselors from all grade levels. The questionnaire was designed using core skills described in the CACREP (2009) standards and Peterson, et al.'s (2004) categories of school counselor experience and competence. The survey was composed of 17 items and measured by a 5-point Likert scale, with a range of 1 to 5, with 1 = *very poor* and 5 = *very strong*. The perceived self-efficacy score was based on a sum of scores measuring four hypothesized factors:

1. Factor 1 = Understanding stakeholders' concerns
2. Factor 2 = Counseling and guidance skills
3. Factor 3 = Adjusting to the demands of the profession,
4. Factor 4 = Relationship with stakeholders

To explore the constructs of the questionnaire, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Based on the initial component eigenvalues, item loadings (see Table 1), and scree plot, a 4-factor solution best fit the data. Results of the principal-axis provided further support for a 4-factor model to fit the data. Based on the rotated solution, Factor 1 (eigenvalue = 6.15) included items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13; Factor 2 (eigenvalue = 1.74) included items 1, 6, 7, and 8; Factor 3 (eigenvalue = 1.41) included items 14, 15, 16, and 17; and Factor 4 (eigenvalue = 1.21) included items 2, 3, 4, and 5. The complete rotated solution for the principal-axis analysis is presented in Table 3. Overall, the 4 factors accounted for 61.8% of the item variance. Some of the items (e.g., item 3, 12, and 17) loaded similarly on two factors; in these cases the items were assigned to the factor with the highest loading and these item assignments were consistent with the interpretation of the 4 factors. The reliability coefficient for this scale was .88.

Predictor Variables

Three predictors were investigated in the study. The main predictor, teaching experience, refers to a self-report on whether or not participants were school teachers. If they, indeed had been teachers, they were asked to identify the total number of years they served in the classroom. Approximately 29% ($n = 90$) of respondents reported having no classroom teaching experience. Of those having classroom teaching experience (71%), years ranged from 1 to 45 ($M = 10.19$, $SD = 7.88$).

School counseling experience was the second predictor. Participants were asked to self-report the number of years employed as a school counselor. Years ranged

Table 1*Factor Loadings for the Rotated 4-Factor Solution*

Items	Factor Loadings			
	1	2	3	4
1. My counseling skills as:	.08	.73	.12	.19
2. My relationship with the teachers at my school as:	.19	.31	.27	.64
3. My relationship with the students at my school as:	-.02	.52	-.00	.61
4. My relationship with the administrators at my school as:	.16	-.21	.14	.74
5. My relationship with the parents of the children at my school as:	.27	.39	.01	.56
6. My ability and comfort in teaching whole-classroom lessons as:	.20	.49	.20	.00
7. My ability in conducting small group lessons as:	.10	.73	.10	.04
8. My ability in conducting individual counseling sessions as:	.22	.72	.19	.13
9. My ability to understand teacher concerns as:	.79	.21	.18	.14
10. My ability to understand administrator concerns as:	.76	-.13	.22	.32
11. My ability to understand parent concerns as:	.77	.27	.12	.21
12. My ability to understand child/adolescent development as:	.60	.48	.17	.01
13. My understanding of the "teacher culture" as:	.70	.19	.28	.01
14. My comfort in adjusting to the day-to-day world of education as:	.29	.17	.72	.06
15. My comfort in adjusting to the demands for personal flexibility as:	.13	.07	.87	.09
16. My ability to adjust to the physical and emotional demands of school counseling as:	.17	.21	.80	.17
17. My comfort with ethical demands and ethical decision making as:	.25	.41	.50	.08

Note: Boldface indicates loading of the item on its respective factor. Factor 1 = Understanding Stakeholders' Concerns; Factor 2 = Counseling and Guidance Skills; Factor 3 = Adjusting to the Demands as School Counselors; Factor 4 = Relationship with Stakeholders

from 1 to 40 ($M = 11.44$, $SD = 8.29$). The third predictor involved membership collective self-esteem.

The Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) was utilized for the study to measure school counselors' collective self-esteem. It measures a person's collective identity within his/her profession. The CSES is a 16-item, 7-point (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), Likert-type scale which measures a person's collective identity within his/her profession.

The CSES is composed of four subscales measuring four dimensions of collective self-esteem (i.e. membership collective self-esteem, private collective self-esteem, public collective self-esteem, and importance to identity). The subscale, *membership collective self-esteem* assesses an individual's judgment of how worthy he or she is as a member of his or her social group which is the school counseling profession in this study. The items included "I am a worthy member of the counseling profession I belong to." The subscale, *private collective self-esteem* measures personal judgments of how positively one views their social groups (i.e. the school counseling profession). The items included "I feel good about the school counseling profession."

The third subscale, *public collective self-esteem* measures one's perceptions of how positively other people evaluate one's social groups. The items included "In general, others think that the school counseling profession is unworthy." The last subscale, *importance to identity* assesses the importance of one's social group membership to one's self-concept. The items included "The school counseling profession is an important reflection of who I am." Higher scores are associated with

higher levels of collective self-esteem in each domain. For the purpose of the study, only the *membership collective self-esteem* subscale was used.

Researchers conducting validation studies have shown internal consistency reliabilities ranging from .71 to .88, with the reliability coefficient for the *membership collective self-esteem* scale at .73 (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). In the present study the CSES was modified to specifically refer to those in the school counselor social group. Such adaptation has been done successfully in the past by earlier researchers (e.g. Crocker et al., 1994).

Data Analysis

Before examining the model, correlations among three predictor variables and a criterion variable were examined. A multiple regression procedure was entered in three blocks (hierarchical multiple regression). The first model included only our main predictor variable, teaching experience. The second model included another predictor variable, school counseling experience as well as the teaching experience variable. For the third model, teaching experience, school counseling experience, and membership collective self-esteem were entered. This arrangement was for investigating the unique amount of variance of teaching experience on perceived effectiveness as school counselors by our main predictor variable, teaching experience, above and beyond what is explained by the school counseling experience variable. Also, the unique amount of variance of collective identity on perceived effectiveness as school counselors by collective identity, above and beyond what is explained by other predictor variables (school counseling and teaching experience).

Results

The means and standard deviations of four variables used in the study are described in Table 2. The mean of perceived effectiveness (criterion variable) was 4.36, with a standard deviation of .40.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	N	M	SD
Effectiveness	308	4.36	.40
TE	308	11.44	8.29
SCE	308	7.21	8.09
MCSE	308	4.40	.56

Note. TE = Teaching Experience, SCE = School Counseling Experience, and MCSE = Membership Collective Self-Esteem.

The mean of school counseling experience and teaching experience were 7.21 ($SD = 8.09$) and 11.44 ($SD = 8.29$), respectively. The mean of the last predictor variable, collective identity, was 4.40 with a standard deviation of 0.56. The correlations between the criterion variable and the three predictor variables can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
Correlations Among Variables

	Effectiveness	TE	SCE	MCSE
Effectiveness				
TE	.08			
SCE	.19**	.11*		
MCSE	.46**	-.03	.12*	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. TE = Teaching Experience, SCE = School Counseling Experience, and MCSE = Membership Collective Self-Esteem.

The results indicated that a statistically positive relationship between effectiveness and the two predictor variables (i.e. school counseling experience and membership collective self-esteem; $r = .19, p = .00, r = .46, p = .00$, respectively). The relationship between effectiveness and teaching experience was not statistically significant.

To test the first model, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with the main predictor variable (teaching experience) and the criterion variable (perceived effectiveness). The results of the analysis revealed that the influence of teaching experience on the perceived effectiveness as school counselors was not significant ($B = .004, p = .16$). The variable explained only 0.6% of variance of the perceived effectiveness as school counselors ($R = .08, R^2 = .006$). From a practical standpoint this model produced a small effect size based on Cohen's (1988) standards.

Next, the second model was examined, which included the school counseling experience in addition to the first model. The results indicated that the equation of the two variables accounted for 3.9% of the variance ($R = .198, R^2 = .039$) with teaching experience ($B = .003, p = .30$) and school counseling experience ($B = .009, p = .001$) of the perceived effectiveness. From a practical standpoint the second model produced a small to medium effect size based on Cohen's (1988) standards. The influence of school counseling experience alone was significant to the perceived effectiveness of school counselors. To examine the third model, which included the membership collective self-esteem as an additional variable in the second equation, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results showed that the equation with the three predictor variables accounted for 23.4% of the variance ($R = .484, R^2 = .234$) with teaching experience ($B = .004, p = .004$), school counseling experience ($B = .006, p =$

.013), and membership collective self-esteem ($B = .31, p = .00$). The third model produced a medium to large effect size based on Cohen's (1988) standards. The results revealed that school counseling experience and membership collective self-esteem were significantly related to changes in the criterion variable – perceived effectiveness as school counselors. These results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of Multiple Regression Analyses (n = 308)

	Model	B	SE	β	t
1	TE	.004	.003	.080	1.40
2	TE	.003	.003	.059	1.04
	SCE	.009	.003	.183	3.233*
3	TE	.004	.002	.077	1.53
	SCE	.006	.002	.127	2.49*
	MCSE	.314	.036	.445	8.79**

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. TE = Teaching Experience, SCE = School Counseling Experience, and MCSE = Membership Collective Self-Esteem.

Discussion

School counselor credentialing requirements vary from state to state. Each focuses standards to ensure those practicing within their jurisdiction are highly qualified, able to effectively fulfill job requirements and able to promote overall student success. Despite efforts to bring consistency to requirements, a major variation in state requirements is the requirement to have prior teaching experience. The research above parallels previous research (Baker, 1994; Olson & Allen, 1993; Peterson et al., 2004) indicating that school counselors do not differ in their perceived effectiveness based on prior teaching experience. Perceived effectiveness as school counselors is apparently more closely associated with strong feelings of membership to the school counseling profession. In addition, school counseling experience is also closely associated with

perceived effectiveness. Teaching experience may be a benefit, but not a necessity. Rather than emphasizing the need for or lack of need for prior teaching experience, this research accentuates the need for new school counselors entering the field to have received appropriate experiences in the role of a professional school counselor during their practicum and internships. It also highlights the importance of a firm grasp of the roles and responsibilities of a school counselor. These may be useful strategies to promote school counselor success and ensure school counselor effectiveness (i.e. can understand their stakeholders concerns, are skilled in counseling and guidance, are able to adjust to the demands of the profession and have positive relationships with stakeholders).

Previous teaching experience is undoubtedly a valuable way to learn about the school environment and gain the much needed experience in a school. Previous researchers have highlighted the benefits of having teaching experience prior to becoming a school counselor (Bringman & Lee, 2008; Desmond, West, & Bubenzer, 2007). Although teaching experience may be of assistance for new school counselors, the current research indicates experience as a school counselor to be more essential. This finding is consistent with Bringman and Lee's study which identified school counseling experience as a significant variable explaining school counselors' competence in conducting classroom guidance lessons. In addition, these findings indicate that membership collective self-esteem and membership identity as a school counselor are more important than teaching and counseling experience in helping school counselors' self perceived effectiveness; thus, it is important for counselor education programs to provide pre-service school counselors with/without teaching

experience a solid knowledge foundation. Such knowledge can most adequately be gained through practical experiences to develop their identity as school counselors.

All school counselor training programs must consider the importance of comprehensive school internship experiences in promoting novice school counselors' feelings of competence. CACREP, which is widely considered the "gold standard" for counseling programs, recognizes the need for such experience. It has called internship experiences "the most critical elements in the program" (CACREP, 2009). CACREP also recognizes the need for membership and professional identity, indicating that students who graduate from CACREP accredited programs should have knowledge of professional organizations, knowledge of the role and function of a school counselor, and have the professional identity of a school counselor. While CACREP provides assurance that all graduates of accredited programs will have adequate experience, it is important to acknowledge that not all school counselor preparation programs are CACREP accredited nor do all programs seek to gain accreditation.

Several states have attempted to align credentialing standards with education requirements. States such as Connecticut, Delaware and Illinois include teaching experience as one way to gain knowledge of the school environment, but also include alternate options such as school counseling internships to gain necessary experience (ASCA, 2007). These options mimic the internship hours required by CACREP. They also allow prospective school counselors who graduate from non-accredited programs an alternate route to certification. Such standards ensure that new school counselors understand the environment in which they will be working, but do not exclude potential school counselors who have not previously been classroom teachers. Internship

experiences allow prospective school counselors to become familiar with the school setting and also help them learn how to get involved as active individuals within the profession. Those two components are, according to the above results, the most effective ways to promote effectiveness as school counselors.

Limitations

Although the study showed that school counseling experience and membership identity can be effective in developing school counselors' self-efficacy, certain limitations may have affected the outcome of the study. First, self-report questionnaires were used for the study, thus it might affect participants' responses. The participants' biases and conceptualization may play roles in responding the questionnaires. Social desirability may also have influenced some of the school counselors' responses. Second, the sample may not be representative of the entire field of school counseling due to the small sample size and sampling procedure. The sample was generated by contacting state school counseling associations and contacting potential participants through each state branch. All participants were members of their respective state school counseling associations and thus may have an elevated sense of professional identity. Third, the perceived effectiveness questionnaire looked at school counselors' perceived effectiveness and not necessarily how other's perceived their work. Future research in this area should explore ways to measure actual school counselor effectiveness including student outcome data from school counselor interventions or survey other stakeholders (e.g. teachers) within the school in regards to school counselor effectiveness.

Implications and Conclusion

School counselors are at the epicenter of most schools and provide vital services to all students within those schools. Credentialing bodies should have the highest standards in place to ensure that those placed in school counseling roles are highly trained to perform effectively. One way to ensure prospective school counselors are adequately trained is to align credentialing standards with skills that are shown to promote school counselor effectiveness. Aligning credentialing standards to needed skills is also an important first step in the process of bringing uniformity to school counselor credentialing standards across the nation.

While the current findings were based on a sample population, they, along with previous research, shows that school counseling experience and collective self-esteem play a significant role in developing feelings of effectiveness as school counselors. In addition, prior teaching experience, a requirement still in place in several states, was not found to be an important variable in explaining the competence of school counselors.

Discrepancies and differences in certification requirements among the different states have no doubt dissuaded some perspective counselors from pursuing a career as a professional school counselor. Baker and Gerler (2008) state: "The profession and those it serves will benefit from access to all caring and competent prospects." (p.22) In order to attract caring and competent individuals it is important that the profession come together and determine appropriate steps to help newcomers succeed.

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