Understanding Elementary and Middle School Counselors'

Experiences with Disability Awareness and Advocacy

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Abstract

Students with disabilities are at greater risk for depression, substance use, bullying, and fewer friendships, largely due to negative attitudes and misperceptions from their nondisabled peers. School counselors are particularly important stakeholders in improving the experiences of students with disabilities. This qualitative study uses the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies as a lens to understand how six school counselors raise disability awareness within the context of social justice advocacy. Results indicate that participants primarily focused on ways to advocate alongside or on behalf of students with disabilities at an individual level (client/student domain). Additional findings highlight the need for increased disability-related training within counselor preparation programs and the importance of including disability issues within the frame of multicultural competence. The results of this study fill a gap in the literature and lead to a deeper understanding of how school counselors are presently engaging in disability programs in their schools. Additionally, findings from this research directly aid in the construction of coursework and related experiences that would enhance the preparation of pre-service school counselors.

Keywords: advocacy; students with disabilities; counselor preparation; disability awareness

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Experiences with Disability Awareness and Advocacy

Presently, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) recommend that school counselors function as *social justice advocates* for students within their schools (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). According to Lee (2007), social justice in counseling means:

> …promoting access and equity to ensure full participation in the life of a society, particularly for those who have been excluded on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of background or group membership. (p. 1)

Although social justice advocacy is often associated with race and class (Astramovitch & Harris, 2007; Moss & Singh, 2015), students with disabilities (SWDs) have a variety of needs for which school counselors must advocate. This is because most SWDs experience *ableism*, or the "combination of discrimination, power, and prejudice related to the privileging of able-bodied people" (Eisenhauer, 2007, p. 8). While the impact of ableism on SWDs is far reaching, Milsom, Goodnough, and Akos (2007) assert that school counselors, especially those working in *public* schools, are uniquely positioned to mitigate its impacts as they can help to "create more positive school experiences that promote their academic career and personal/social growth" (p. 1). For the purposes of this paper, we define *disability* as any category that would qualify an individual for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (e.g., autism, cerebral palsy, specific learning disability; IDEA, 2004), as well as any diagnosis found in the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (e.g., non-suicidal self-injury;

American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

      According to the ASCA (2016), school counselors have an important role in advocating for SWDs, which includes collaborating with families and other professionals in order to support the SWDs' academic, social/emotional, and career development. However, school professionals have been criticized for focusing solely on promoting equity as it relates to academic success for minority student populations, such as SWDs (Astramovich & Harris, 2007), while excluding social factors that are also critical to students' healthy functioning and development (Kemple, Duncan, & Strangis, 2002). Many interventions and strategies that school counselors are trained to implement focus on changing or modifying the social behaviors of SWDs through individual or group counseling sessions focused on the development of social skills, and/or behavior plans (Milsom, 2002). While these interventions can be beneficial, school counselor education places an emphasis on how to change the behaviors of SWDs (ASCA, 2013), rather than how to change the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of nondisabled students regarding their peers with disabilities. Moreover, these interventions are not grounded in social justice advocacy; therefore, they fall short of facilitating a school culture where SWDs are fully accepted.

      Many school counselors feel underprepared to meet the needs of SWDs (Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2002). This is due in part to a lack of uniformity in disability preparation across counselor education programs (Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2002). Given that 13% of students enrolled in public schools have disabilities (U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), it is essential to highlight the specific

disability awareness practices that exist and understand the experiences of school counselors who do this work (Singh et al., 2010). There is a lack of empirical investigation that describes these lessons or programs (Field & Baker, 2004; Singh et al., 2010). Thus, this exploratory, qualitative study uses the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002) as a lens to better understand how school counselors raise disability awareness within the context of advocacy.

Disability in Schools: Understanding the Role of School Counselors

Literature on school counselor advocacy research primarily falls into three camps: (1) broad investigation of social justice advocacy (Crook, Stenger, & Gesselman, 2015; Feldwisch & Whiston, 2017; Field & Baker, 2004; Singh et al. 2010); (2) exploration of school counselor advocacy on behalf of students of color (Astramovitch & Harris, 2007; Moss & Singh, 2015); and (3) examination of advocacy and LGBTQ students (Beck, Rausch, & Wood, 2014; Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2016). Rarely do empirical advocacy studies consider how school counselors can function as social justice advocates for SWDs.

Social Justice Advocacy

Social justice advocacy is an approach that positions school counselors as agents for social change, as counselors "are able to see the world as historically oppressed client groups see it, which, in turn, allows them to identify whether client problems are internally driven or systemically based and to address such issues appropriately" (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014, p. 105). Numerous school counseling stakeholders highlight the importance of social justice advocacy (Lee, 2007). In 2003, the ACA adopted a series of advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) that provided

a systematic framework that guides counselors and counselor educators in their pursuit of equity in schools. Building on this work, ASCA's *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2016) highlight the ethical responsibility of school counselors in the belief that all students can learn and in advocacy efforts to help ensure that learning environments support the needs of all students.

The ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) are organized into three domains: client/student, school/community, and public arena. Within each level of advocacy, there are two sub-domains that emphasize *advocacy with* and *advocacy on behalf of* an individual (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). When working with students at the client/student level, school counselors engage directly with the individual. The client/student level is divided into two categories: client/student empowerment (advocacy with) and client/student advocacy (advocacy on behalf). At the empowerment level, school counselors help students recognize external barriers and develop strategies that help them become empowered to develop self-advocacy skills (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). This work can occur in the classroom, in small groups, or individually (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). At the advocacy level, school counselors advocate on behalf of the student by evaluating the need for intervention within the system and determining a plan of action (Toparek et al., 2009).

The school/community domains "involve the community, school, and interacting systems in which clients live, study, and work" (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009, p. 276). At this level, the counselor primarily functions as an ally (Toparek et al., 2009). School/community sub-domains consist of community collaboration (advocacy with) and systems advocacy (advocacy on behalf of). At the community collaboration level,

counselors work with groups (e.g., students who identify as LGBTQ) in order to facilitate social change (Ratts et al., 2007; Toparek, et al., 2009). At the systems advocacy level, the school counselor's role is to identify barriers that "affect client development and use data to demonstrate the urgency for change. . . [and] work with others to identify resistance to change and develop concrete strategies to address such issues with clients" (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014, p. 107).

The final domain, public arena, consists of public information (advocacy with) and social/political advocacy (advocacy on behalf of). Counselors working at the public information level collaborate with the client's community in order to raise awareness about oppression and address social and political inequity (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014; Toparek et al., 2009). In some cases, counselors may choose to involve related professionals and media outlets in order to disseminate information to the public. When operating on the social/political advocacy level, counselors work—oftentimes at the legislative level—to address unjust policies and systemic injustice (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014; Toparek et al., 2009). Although the social/political advocacy level can involve clients, their participation is not a necessary component of this sub-domain (Toparek et al., 2009). While each of these domains can pertain to counselor advocacy with or on behalf of any marginalized population, empirical research does not reflect the ways that they can be leveraged to support SWDs.

Ableism in Schools

Research (Lindsay & McPhereson, 2012; Milsom, 2006; Shah, Wallace, Conor, & Kiszley, 2015) has indicated that SWDs experience higher rates of depression, conduct disorders, low self-esteem, substance use, bullying, and fewer friendships than their

non-disabled peers, often because of the negative attitudes and misperceptions that their nondisabled peers hold toward disability. Although ableism can range from subtle (e.g., thinking a classmate doesn't like sports because he is in a wheelchair) to overt (e.g., teasing a peer because she stutters), these attitudinal forms of oppression can compromise the personal and social development of children with disabilities (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). School counselors can address ableism in schools by functioning as social justice advocates. On a social/emotional level, they can work with SWDs to develop self-awareness and self-advocacy skills. Advocacy at the classroom or the school level can include the "implementation of programs for both school personnel and students, aimed at examining self-awareness of bias, increasing sensitivity towards differences, accepting others, and positively supporting students with special needs" (Hall, 2015, p. 219).

Researchers have identified disability programming that has shown to mitigate the effects of students' ableist attitudes, which includes: (a) promoting contact between students who have disabilities and those who do not (Kemple et al., 2002); (b) educating all students about disability in order to promote accurate understanding of and appreciation for this form of difference; and (c) teaching tolerance, respect, and acceptance to all students (Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2006). Researchers (Milsom, 2006; Ratts et al., 2007) have suggested that these interventions may work most effectively to promote equitable social experiences for SWDs when they are used to address all students, not just SWDs. Teaching all students through classroom-based lessons has been shown to increase sensitivity toward differences, promote acceptance, positively support SWDs in their peer relationship formation, and shift the overall attitudinal

climate of the school regarding disability (Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2006). Thus, school counselors, who have access to all students and provide individual, group, and classroom programming, may be particularly important stakeholders in improving the school experience for SWDs (ASCA, 2012). Given the role that school counselors play regarding disability advocacy and general awareness, the guiding questions for this research are: (a) How do elementary and middle school counselors implement disability-related programming within the context of social justice advocacy? and (b) What challenges do elementary and middle school counselors encounter when implementing disability-related programming?

Method

In this exploratory, qualitative study, we used thematic analysis to identify common themes across participant interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, this study aimed to provide a rich and detailed description of participants' experiences and challenges (Creswell, 2007). This project was approved by the university's institutional review board and informed consent was provided by each participant.

Participants

This study included a purposive sample of six school counselors. Selection criteria included individuals who were (a) elementary or middle school counselors and (b) engaged in some type of disability-based programming at their schools. The research team initially identified potential school counselor participants ($N = 44$) based on referrals from their current contacts in a Northeastern city and surrounding areas. They solicited these participants initially through email, which yielded three participants. They then sent a follow-up email to the remaining 41 participants. Eight responded by

saying that they did not believe that they used disability programming in their respective schools. Finally, to further increase the number of participants, they called 475 additional elementary and middle school counselors listed via the ASCA member database, which members can access. In order to do so, the researchers did a search for ASCA members who worked as middle or elementary school counselors in a particular geographical region. After the initial email, the researchers sent two more follow-up emails. This resulted in four additional participants.

Although researchers interviewed seven total participants, one of the participants had been in practice for only one month and spoke about what she wanted to do in terms of disability awareness rather than practices she had already implemented. For this reason, they did not include her interview in the data analysis, resulting in six participants. Table A1 synthesizes participants' demographic data and includes additional information related to their grade level (e.g., elementary or middle school), years in practice, school description (e.g., public or private), sex, age, disability status, and ethnic background. One participant chose not to submit demographic information. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Researchers and Procedures

Two female assistant professors collected and analyzed study data. The first researcher taught in the education program at the university and had prior experience as a middle and high school special educator. The second researcher taught in the counseling program at the same university and had prior experience as a school counselor. The first researcher had extensive prior knowledge or experience related to

disability programming and advocacy, and the second researcher had limited prior knowledge.

Participation in this study included a 14-item semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) and an optional five-minute paper-pencil survey. Interviews typically lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Participants were asked questions related to their background and training (e.g., *How—if at all—were social justice advocacy and multicultural competencies addressed in your training program?*), use of disability awareness (e.g., *Can you walk me through a lesson, program, project, or activity that involved disability awareness?*), as well as any difficulties they encountered (e.g., *What challenges do you face in terms of implementation or presentation of disability awareness?*).

Data Analysis

In order to identify and report themes, researchers analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. These steps included: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report. Researchers worked independently and collaboratively throughout each step. This approach was chosen as a stand-alone method, which allows for identifying and analyzing patterns of responses in the data set.

When developing themes for this project, researchers used theory-driven codes (i.e., codes used to guide the research based on theories) (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). Thus, researchers used the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) as a theoretical framework and revised the initial codes (step 2) within this

context. After reading steps 1 and 2, they looked for instances where the school counselors described using disability programming to advocate on (a) individual, (b) group, and/or (c) public levels. Researchers identified codes as "individual" advocacy anytime participants spoke of working with students to address disability-related barriers (e.g., any instance where a participant spoke of implementing class-based lessons on disability in response to student need). When an initial code focused on working to raise awareness at the school/community level, researchers labeled it under the "groups" code. An example of this is a disability-related fundraiser or community activity that the counselor helped implement. Finally, researchers coded for language related to disability advocacy at the public level (i.e., initiatives related to disability policy). Within each domain code, they re-coded the data, looking for places when participants spoke of advocating with or advocating on behalf of an individual or group. Table A2 provides an overview of the subdomains that each of the participants addressed while raising disability awareness in their respective schools.

In line with the research questions, they also coded for challenges that school counselors encountered during the advocacy process. After re-coding the data, three major themes emerged: (a) counselors practicing disability awareness at the client/student level, (b) counselors practicing disability awareness at the school/community level, and (c) perceived challenges.

Trustworthiness

The researchers utilized several strategies to address the trustworthiness of the study. They employed inter-coder agreement; when reviewing the same sections of data, they agreed upon codes 95% of the time. In the 5% of cases where researchers

coded data differently, they had an open discussion regarding code selection and conferred until they reached consensus. Additionally, when writing about the research, the researchers employed "thick, rich description," through the "reporting of sufficient quotes and field descriptions to provide evidence for researchers' interpretations and conclusions" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 201).

Due to both researchers' prior experience working in schools, the researchers engaged in reflexive journaling to bracket their own personal biases and assumptions related to their experiences working with and advocating for students with disabilities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They began journaling at the inception of the research project and concluded the journaling process after they had written the findings. In line with bracketing procedures, they used the reflective journals in order to examine their reasons for undertaking the research as well as their assumptions regarding disability and the role of school counselors (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The first researcher reflected that she was driven to undertake the research because she encountered few instances during her career in special education where school counselors worked to raise disability awareness. The second researcher felt she engaged in limited disability awareness advocacy during her work as a school counselor but recognized the importance of this work.

Results

In order to better understand how school counselors raised disability awareness within the context of advocacy, findings from this study are divided into three themes: (a) disability awareness at the client/student level, (b) disability awareness at the school/community level, and (c) challenges: minding the gaps and learning on the job.

These themes reveal the way that that participants did—and did not—practice disability advocacy to raise awareness and any challenges they identified related to this work.

Disability Awareness at the Client/Student Level

Data revealed that participants primarily advocated for SWDs and raised disability awareness at the client/student level. Within this domain, participants focused on ways to work with SWDs and ways that they could work on behalf of these students.

Client/Student Empowerment. All participants (*N* = 6) worked to empower students at the school level. For several participants, this meant teaching SWDs how to self-advocate. For Thalia, a middle school counselor, this meant breaking students out of unproductive cycles, as "some of them have this learned helplessness thing like, 'I have a disability or mom always, you know, does this for me.' And I work with them to become more independent." The school counselors helped students cultivate self-awareness of their disabilities and worked with them to determine the supports they needed in order to be successful.

Participants also spoke of working with students on class- and grade-level guidance lessons. In these instances, students and school counselors worked cooperatively to raise disability awareness, and the students—and their parents—supported discussion related to the child's disability. Shannon, a middle school counselor, collaborated with her students and their families and co-presented on different disability topics:

> So, we do try to deliver lessons and talk about disabilities. I've had kids who I've worked with over the years that are willing to advocate and educate their own classmates. Which is huge, hearing loss. I've had kids come in and "in service" their classmates about why they need to use an FM system which is huge, and

I'm all for it. And we've done that with allergies, because I have kids with latex allergies, and so let's talk about it as a classroom community. If you're comfortable standing up in your own skin, I'm here to support you. We've talked about Tourette's. I have kids who want to put it out there so that we can have dialogue, and other kids can ask questions. If [the student is] not comfortable answering, I can field it. That's been huge.

These discussions created opportunities for disability education and dialogue. Moreover, the lessons empowered students, and through conversation, they worked to discuss their disabilities with their peers in effort to de-stigmatize their diagnoses.

In addition to lessons, school counselors and students worked together on school-based projects. Dana's K-4 elementary school was extremely diverse in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and disability. She explained that she "really focus[es] on individualism in the sense that we are all individuals, but we all come together as one, and accepting everyone for who they are. I do a lot on diversity." At the start of the school year, Dana used a welcome-back activity called "We are All Fish in the Same School" to address disability within the context of difference. She said that "every kid in the school was challenged to create a fish and they all look different, but we all swim together," and she hung each fish in the entryway of the school.

Vanessa, a middle school counselor, worked with students to create a community poster presentation on disabilities. Each classroom was assigned a different disability category, and at the culmination of the project, students presented their posters to parents and other members of the community. As she explained, the presentation was well-received:

They shared the posters that had facts about the different disabilities. One classroom did ADHD, and one classroom did stuff about depression and different

disabilities, like that. Some kids did more research on their own diagnoses, but
each class has a specific topic that they were working on to spread the
knowledge. It went over really well, and the students were really excited about it.
Actually, the kids always really appreciated it. You know, because a lot of times
they feel like they're different, that they're left out. So, it was nice for them to not
only be able to talk about their experiences but know that there are other people
just like them out there doing the same thing.

Overall, participants used a variety of strategies to advocate with SWDs. From one-on-
one meetings to larger, school-based sessions, they worked collaboratively with their
students to raise disability awareness.

Client/Student Advocacy. Almost all participants ($N = 5$) spoke of advocating
and raising disability awareness of behalf of students in their schools. In many
instances, this meant consulting with teachers on behalf of the student. Andrew, a
middle school counselor, noted that several of his "504 students, who have Asperger's,
have a very difficult time remaining in class or being in class." Many of their teachers
approached Andrew because they expressed difficulty when addressing student
behavior, so Andrew tried to "help them understand the struggle that that student is
going through and the challenges that they face, and then separate from that I'll work
with the teacher for different plans to refocus that student." In addition to one-on-one
meetings with teachers, Shannon worked with her principal to create opportunities to
work with teachers in a systematic way. She and her fellow counselors conducted
school-wide professional development four times per year, where she and her
colleagues would meet with each grade level for 45 minutes. During the sessions,
"we've talked about accommodating, modifying, and explaining the differences [between

the two]. We ask, 'how can this look in your classroom?' share what really works, and just try to give them real life examples."

Participants also used guidance lessons to address larger, disability-related issues that emerged in their school communities. In Dana's school, nondisabled students struggled with issues of *fairness*. They were frustrated because SWDs were receiving accommodations. In response, she created an "Equality and Fairness" lesson with the intention of teaching students the difference between the two terms:

> I'll go around and give every student a precut piece of paper that says something that's wrong with them. Like for example, it will say "you broke your arm," "you have a stomach ache," "you have a sore throat," "you have a scratch on your foot," you have all different types of ailments, per say. . . And then they raise their hand and I say "Oh, what's wrong with you?" And they say "Oh, I got a bee sting" and I say, "Oh, here's a Band-Aid." Someone else says, "I broke my foot," so "Oh, here's a Band-Aid." "Oh, I have a splinter," so "here's a Band-Aid." So, I go through every single person giving them a Band-Aid. I ask them, "Did everybody get what they needed?" "No, well if I broke my arm a Band-Aid wouldn't fix it." Right. "If I couldn't see and needed glasses, a Band-Aid wouldn't fix it." So, I tell them, "Right, that's equal, everything's equal, but it's not fair." It's not fair to that person, so they really start to talk about that. And that what classmates might need, you might not need that, but they do. Equal and fair aren't the same thing.

Dana felt that the activity allowed students to understand that everyone needed something different and that SWDs were not receiving any type of academic advantage.

Andrew chose to implement guidance lessons in response to an uptick in self-injury at his middle school. As he explained, he wanted to educate students and increase the level of student-reporting:

> We leaned heavily on the high school counselor and the high school student assistance counselor. They had done a program for their juniors in their junior

health [class] because they had seen a similar uptick. And then modified [the lesson] to reach 13-year olds instead of 17-year olds. I would say in the two weeks immediately following it in the fall we get a lot of kids who come down and tell us about people who they are worried about, which is great.

By focusing on a variety of school-based needs, participants were able to educate members of the student population and advocate on behalf of SWDs.

Disability Awareness at the School/Community Level

Though participants primarily practiced disability advocacy and awareness at the client/student level, two participants—Vanessa and Thalia—spoke of the ways that they worked at the school/community level; specifically, both participants detailed ways that they engaged in community collaboration (working with). Vanessa collaborated with a local Youth Mental Health Alliance, a group of students from different area districts who worked together to raise mental health awareness. As she explained:

Some of our students in the TES classrooms, Therapeutic Emotional Support, were able to participate in that program, so they were going into it with the experience of actually having the disabilities and the mental health issues. And they were able to share that. So that was really, really cool. And that was to spread awareness to other schools and districts.

By connecting students in her school with peers in neighboring districts, Vanessa promoted positive disability identity. Thalia also worked alongside students and community members; in her case, the focus was on autism awareness:

During autism awareness month, we did have an autism walk, and we raised money. And students were able to buy autism awareness t-shirts and the money we raised from a bake sale, we donated to an autism organization. We did a walk around the community, and we had a big banner that said, "Autism Awareness"

and all the kids got to sign it. And throughout the week, in the classrooms during homeroom, they watched a video about autism and talked about it.

Thalia and Vanessa leveraged existing connections within the disability community to raise awareness. In addition to teaching students how to function as advocates, these collaborations appeared to have a positive impact on the students themselves.

Challenges: Minding the Gaps and Learning on the Job

Although participants raised disability awareness and advocated with and on behalf of individuals with disabilities, most participants ($N = 5$) identified several challenges that affected their work with SWDs. Participants expressed having limited preparation regarding laws (especially 504 plans) and the general practice of working with SWDs in public school settings. Although Thalia felt prepared to work with students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, she spoke of feeling less prepared to work with SWDs:

> I think there's a lot that I learned on my own about special education laws. . . And it's just it can be really intimidating if you don't know the laws and the deadlines of when certain paperwork is supposed to be in, or what you can say or what you can't say.

Similarly, Andrew offered, "I wish I knew more about what accommodations could be used or have been effective for kids in other buildings, in other settings or what's been effective for teachers." Like Thalia and Andrew, other participants felt that most strategies and interventions related to working with SWDs were learned while in practice rather than in their graduate programs.

During Jen's training, "there was a one-credit class on multicultural issues, not necessarily about special ed. There was no special ed. So, it was learning about being

respectful and learning about different cultures that for the population you're working in."

Vanessa voiced a similar experience, as she expressed that during her training "we

didn't have to do anything with special education." She noted the importance of learning

about disabilities from a holistic standpoint: "No matter where you are, I think having

knowledge of all the different types of students that you can see is really important. I

think that if you only discuss cultural differences, you're missing out on a whole lot."

Dana proved to be the only outlier. During her training, she was required to take

special education classes about a variety of high-incidence disabilities. She also had to

"learn how to write IEPs. Even though I don't write them, I had to learn how to write

them. But it's important to know how to interpret them. And in writing them, you learn

how to interpret them." Although Dana received significant training related to working

with SWDs, her experience appeared to be an exception. However, she noted that

disability was never discussed within the framework of multicultural counseling; her

training focused on diagnoses and treatment.

Interestingly, participants ($N = 4$) felt that their preparation programs adequately

prepared them to address other forms of diversity with their respective student

populations. Four participants took a full-semester multicultural counseling course plus

additional workshops, and two participants engaged in multicultural counseling

workshops during their training. Internship experiences presented additional

opportunities to learn about diversity (outside of disability). In addition to working in a

diverse school setting for her internship, Thalia participated in an extracurricular law

clinic activity where she worked in conjunction with law students to provide counseling

services to individuals seeking asylum. She felt that her experiences allowed her to be

"sensitive and open to different types of diversity, not just. . . ethnic diversity, but also diversity such as sexual orientation or socioeconomic status." While participants felt less prepared to meet the needs of SWDs after completing their training program, most appeared to be confident in their ability to address other forms of diversity.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this research was to use the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) as a lens to better understand how school counselors raise disability awareness within the context of advocacy. While the intention of this study was to gain insight into specific practices, data revealed that the participants wanted more training related to working with SWDs. In addition to exploring why the school counselors leveraged some domains as opposed to others, it is also useful to consider how counselor education programs can build on existing programming related to multicultural competence and social justice advocacy in order to address school counselor preparation for SWDs.

Advocacy in Response to Student Need

As data revealed, participants' awareness work was primarily situated within the client/student domain. None of the participants spoke of advocating with or on behalf of SWDs within the public arena. Participants appeared to implement disability awareness programming in response to issues that emerged at their respective schools. Andrew noted that self-injurious behavior emerged as a community concern in the middle school where he worked. In response, he created a guidance lesson to address the issue with the seventh-grade students. Dana and Shannon facilitated opportunities where students could discuss their disabilities (and in some cases, their adaptive equipment) with

classmates. Thalia and Andrew consulted with teachers on behalf of their SWDs. Thalia and Vanessa, however, did advocate and raise awareness within the school/ community domain; their approaches to connect to the autism community and the Youth Mental Health Association could be characterized as proactive. Overall, it seems that participants used disability awareness programming in a reactive capacity.

All the strategies presented by participants represent necessary steps that school counselors can take to reduce ableism in their schools. Rather than focusing on modifying the behavior of their SWDs, participants facilitated opportunities for socialization and acceptance (Hall, 2015; Milson, 2002; Milsom, 2006; Ratts et al., 2007). Since the aim of the client/student domain is to use "direct counseling to empower individuals and provid[e] advocacy at the individual level," it is not surprising that counselors created sessions, lessons, and programs in reaction to student need (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009, p. 270). When advocating for SWDs within the school/community or public arena domains, school counselors take a more proactive role in connecting to members of the disability community and changing both systems and policies that negatively affect said individuals (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). The participants in this study expressed that they did not feel fully prepared to meet the needs of SWDs upon entering the profession; almost all of them wanted additional training in their respective counselor preparation programs. In order to advocate and raise awareness in a proactive capacity, one must be familiar with the systemic struggles that individuals encounter. Thus, it is possible that participants' lack of prior knowledge stymied their ability to advocate with or on behalf of SWDs outside of the client/student domain.

Consider Disability Within the Framework of Multicultural Competence

Almost all participants expressed that they wanted more disability-related training prior to entering the profession. These findings support prior research (Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2002) on counselors' self-described lack of preparedness when working with SWDs. Hall (2015) suggests strategies that can increase school counselors' feelings of preparedness, which include infusing course assignments related to special education into pre-existing classes and exposure activities to enhance student learning about special education (p. 221-222).

Building on Hall's suggestion to integrate disability-related content into pre-existing coursework, a novel way to better prepare school counselors to advocate with and on behalf of SWDs is to focus on disability as a facet of multicultural competence. As Milsom (2006) expressed, "Because school counselors are responsible for meeting the needs of all students, comfort with and positive attitudes toward working with students with disabilities can be viewed as important qualities of a professional, ethical, and multiculturally competent school counselor" (p. 69). Drawing on the work of Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis (1992), Ratts and Pedersen (2014) asserted that in order to be multiculturally competent, school counselors must develop requisite awareness, knowledge, and skills.

As related to disability, this could pertain to (a) developing an awareness of any biases or assumptions school counselors hold regarding disabilities and capability, as well as increasing awareness of any privileges the school counselor is afforded on account of his or her ability status; (b) using books, films, and community resources as a means of increasing school counselors' knowledge of past, present, and future issues

encountered by the disability community; and (c) facilitating opportunities for pre-service

school counselors to engage in structured, disability-advocacy projects during their

practicum and internship experiences. Even Dana, who was required to take multiple

special education classes as a part of her training, was not asked to consider disabilities

within the frame of privilege and oppression; this underscores the importance of

embedding programming that considers disability as a marginalized identity.

Integrating disability into pre-existing coursework also presents an opportunity for

counselor educators to address disability within the context of *intersectionality*

(Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality, or the ways in which "multiple forms of inequality

and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time" (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278),

explores the interplay between various identity markers, and it can be used to examine

privilege and power. Table A3 provides a list of resources that school counselor

preparation programs—and practicing school counselors—can draw on in order to build

disability-related competence.

Limitations

It is also important to note the limitations of this research. First, given the size

and relative homogeneity of the sample, findings are not generalizable to the larger

population of school counselors across the country. Further, despite attempting to

recruit a more diverse sample and contacting over 500 potential participants, the

number of respondents was limited. Several potential participants ($N = 22$) declined

participation, citing their lack of knowledge of or practice with disability awareness in

schools. This may suggest that school counselors are not widely engaging in such

practices. School counselors were also certified at different times, had differing years of

experience, and entered the profession through different training programs (which may or may not have addressed disabilities), which could have affected their capacity for and comfortability with using disability-related programming.

Since all data were gathered directly from the participants, self-report bias is also a limitation. The researchers were also unable to observe the actual practices of the participants engaging in disability awareness advocacy work. Self-selection and non-respondent bias are additional limitations, as all respondents willingly elected to participate, and it is possible that school counselors outside of this study are drawing on advocacy domains that are not presented in these findings. Additionally, while the researchers attempted to bracket their prior experiences, their preconceptions may still have influenced the composition of this study. Since the aim of the research was to understand school counselors' practices rather than quantifying the effectiveness of their interventions, we see this research as a necessary first step in understanding the methods that school counselors use to raise disability awareness.

<center>**Future Research**</center>

In order for school counselors to enhance their advocacy work on behalf of SWDs, especially in public schools, they must cultivate a school climate that promotes acceptance of differences (Hall, 2015). One way to do this is to implement programming that allows all students to engage with their understanding of disability. However, there is limited literature on what this might look like in practice. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of these interventions, either through quantitative or qualitative means. Data could be collected at student, teacher, and/or administrative levels. Further,

research could compare the difference between school counselors' advocacy work with SWDs based on their prior training and on the job experiences.

Additionally, findings from this study indicate a range and variation in disability-related training and coursework across counselor training programs. In most cases, this training was minimal. Future researchers may conduct a content analysis of syllabi from different counselor preparation programs to better understand when, where, and how disability is discussed with future counselors. Future researchers could also interview school counseling professors who teach courses on disability and/or multicultural competence to understand their views on disability and their perception of disability as related to multicultural competence. This line of research could shed light on specific gaps in counselor preparation and offer concrete solutions for improvement.

Conclusion

This study used the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) as a lens to explore the experiences and challenges of six school counselors promoting disability awareness within their school counseling programs. The findings suggested that the participants provided programming primarily in the client/student domain and addressed issues in response to circumstances that were presented in their schools. It revealed that they desired increased disability-related training. Because, in general, school counseling research on disability and preventative programming is scant, the results of this study fill a gap in the literature and lead to a deeper understanding of how school counselors are presently engaging in disability programming in their schools and suggest ways to improve such approaches. Additionally, findings from this research can

directly aid in the construction of coursework and related experiences that would

enhance the preparation of pre-service school counselors.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Overview of Participants

Participant	Level	Years in Practice	Years at Current School	School Description	Age Bracket	Sex	Race/Ethnicity
Andrew	Middle	5	5	Public/Rural	30-34	Male	White
Shannon	Middle	13	11	Public/Suburban	35-39	Female	White
Vanessa	Middle	14	14	Public/Suburban	40-44	Female	White
Jen	Elementary	20	4	Urban/Charter	45-50	Female	White
Dana	Elementary	17	5	Public/Suburban	40-44	Female	White
Thalia	Middle	1.5	1	Urban/Charter	30-34	Female	African American or Black/White

Table 2

Overview of the Subdomains That Participants Addressed While Raising Disability Awareness

Participant	Client/Student		School/Community		Public Arena	
	Client/Student Empowerment	Client/Student Advocacy	Community Collaboration	Systems Advocacy	Public Information	Social/ Political Advocacy
Andrew	X	X				
Jen	X	X				
Shannon	X	X				
Vanessa	X		X			
Thalia	X	X	X			
Dana	X	X				

"X" indicates that subdomain is addressed

Table 3

Disability Resources for Counselors and Counselor Educators

Topic	Readings	Media	Websites
Understanding Disability	Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2012). *Is everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press. (Chapter 5) Ostiguy, B. F., Peters, M. L., & Shlasko, D. (2016). Ableism. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, D. Goodman, & K. Y. Joshi (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed., pp. 299–338). New York, NY: Routledge.	TED Talk: Ben Myers: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cclAqPjwKcY Disability Sensitivity Training Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gv1aDEFlXq8	Teaching Tolerance: Disabilities: https://www.tolerance.org/search?query=disability Disability Scoop: https://www.disabilityscoop.com/?pgnc=1
Disability Rhetoric	Garland-Thomson, R. (2002). The politics of staring: Visual rhetorics of disability in popular photography. In R. Garland-Thomson, S. Snyder, & B. J. Brueggemann (Eds.), *Disability studies: Enabling the humanities* (pp. 56–75). New York: Modern Language Association. What I want you to understand about the supercrip stereotype: https://themighty.com/2015/12/challenging-the-supercrip-stereotype-of-people-with-disabilities/	TED Talk: Stella Young: https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thankyou_very_much The Best Fake Charity Collection Buckets: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U_byvTzW4w	
Disability History and the Disability Rights Movement	Shapiro, J. P. (1994). *No pity: People with disabilities forging a new civil rights movement*. Three Rivers Press. Rivera, G. (1972). *Willowbrook*. New York, NY: Random House.	TED Talk: Judith Heumann: https://www.ted.com/talks/judith_heumann_our_fight_for_disability_rights_and_why_we_re_not_done_yet Film: *Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace*	The Zinn Education Project: https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/?wpsolr_fq%5B0%5D=themes_str%3ADisability
Ableism, Ability Privilege, and Intersectionality	Ford, A. R. (2009). It's not just about racism, but ableism. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 26(4), 16. Storey, K. (2007). Combating ableism in schools. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(1), 56-58.	Intersectionality 101: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE	

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Part I: Background

1. Please describe your training program.

   1. For example: size, mission, length of program

2. How, if at all, were multicultural competencies addressed in your training program?

3. Please provide some background regarding your school counseling experience. How long have you been a school counselor and what grade levels have you worked with?

4. Describe the setting where you currently work.

5. What are your job responsibilities as a counselor at your school?

6. What were your experiences with individuals with disabilities prior to working as a school counselor?

Part II: Curricular Approaches

7. How, if at all, do you implement disability programming?

   1. Ex: lessons, programs, activities

8. Can you walk me through a lesson, program or activity that involved disability?

   1. What did you do?

   2. How do you feel that the students responded?

   3. What resources do you draw on?

9. When did you begin to implement disability programming?

10. Why did you choose to implement disability programming?

11. What challenges do you face in terms of implementation or presentation of disability awareness?

12. Did you notice any changes in your school environment in response to the disability-related programming that you provide?

13. Do you address any other types of difference with students in your school?

    1. Ex: Race, class, gender, sexuality

14. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

Biographical Statements

Christa Bialka, EdD, is an associate professor of special education at Villanova University. Prior to earning her doctorate, she taught English and special education in the Boston area. She currently teaches classes related to diversity, disability studies in education, and the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms Her research interests include understanding the development of teacher dispositions and disability awareness in K-12 and higher education. Outside of the classroom, she is an active member of several disability-awareness and advocacy organizations, including the Havertown-Area Community Action Network Disability and Accessibility Action Group.

Stacey Havlik, PhD, is an associate professor of counseling at Villanova University. She currently teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in school and clinical mental health counseling. As a former school counselor, she specializes in training preservice school counselors to be leaders and advocates in the school system. Her primary research interests include investigating school counselor preparation and the issues faced by children and youths experiencing homelessness and those who are considered at risk and facing challenges in their personal, career, and academic development. She has presented her research nationally and internationally.