

**What Factors Sustain Professional Growth Among School Counselors?**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined relationships among self-reported professional expertise, organizational support of evidence-based practices (EBP), and professional growth. Data were collected from 85 members of American School Counseling Association (ASCA). School counselors with higher self-reported expertise reported that they were more likely to improve their school counseling skills. Those with more years of experience supervising school counselors also reported greater professional expertise. No linear relationship was found between organizational support of EBP and perceived professional expertise, which may be attributed to lack of adequate structural and organizational school supports. Implications for future research, counselor development, and supervision are discussed.

*Keywords:* school counselors, professional development, evidence-based practice

## **What Factors Sustain Professional Growth Among School Counselors?**

Although current laws in the United States, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) Act and the No Child Left Behind Act, have reinforced the importance of professional competence in improving student outcomes, the continued professional development and growth of school counselors post formal academic training have remained an underdeveloped area of study (Forman, Fagley, Steiner, & Schneider, 2009; Prasse, 2008). Despite persistent beliefs by counselors and educators to the contrary, meta-analyses have indicated that counselor expertise does not improve dramatically with increased education, training, or experience (Spengler et al., 2009). For example, a recent meta-analysis conducted by Spengler et al., revealed that level of education, training, and experience only had a small effect on clinical judgment ( $d = .12$ ). The authors concluded that experienced counselors are modestly more accurate than those who are less experienced (Spengler et al., 2009, p. 387).

According to the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005), Section C.2.f., and the American School Counselor Association Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2010), counselors maintain professional competency and expertise through continuing education. However, the responsibility remains with individual school counselors to maintain competency; the paths toward continuing professional expertise are unclear, difficult to access, and/or unavailable (Remley & Herlihy, 2010). Supervision, although critical, is limited despite the expectation that school counselors implement comprehensive school counseling programs in their respective settings (Luke & Bernard, 2006). How to best promote the continued growth

and development in school counselors is further complicated by their multifaceted roles and responsibilities (ASCA, 2012).

School counselors have often experienced isolation in their work as a result of being the sole counselor in a school or district, and consequently have received insufficient mentorship and supervision in carrying out their various professional roles as set forth in the ASCA National Model (Wilczenski, Schumacher, & Cook, 2010). In fact, researchers have identified that school counselors are more likely to receive and engage in supervision that is administrative in nature, rather than oriented to counseling skills (Bultsma, 2012; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012). Findings from a national survey of school counseling supervision practices indicated that over 60% of school counselors reported receiving supervision from school principals (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012). With administrators typically serving as the primary supervisor, school counselors may be more likely to increase engagement in quasi-administrative roles and be less prepared to support students' developmental and social/emotional needs (Wilczenski et al., 2010). These issues point to the critical need for providing effective supervision, a key component of maintaining development and competency among professional school counselors.

In addition to receiving supervision, school counselors are often called upon to provide supervision (Studer, 2005; Wilczenski et al., 2010). Various forms and models of supervision have been developed, including the SAAFT (Support, Advocacy, Accessibility, Feedback, and Teamwork) model (Cook, Trepal, & Somody, 2012), PARM (Professional Assessment Response Model) supervision (as cited in Cook et al., 2012), and the School Counselor Supervision Model (SCSM [Luke & Bernard, 2006]).

Additionally, there have been major contributions made within the supervision literature that have focused on developing multicultural competency and social justice advocacy skills (e.g., West-Olatunji, Goodman, & Shure, 2011; Ockerman, Mason, & Chen-Hayes, 2013, respectively). However, little is understood how both providing and engaging in supervision affects continued professional development and competency. That is, significant questions remain regarding factors that are critical to sustaining and nurturing professional growth and development among school counselors after formal academic training.

Findings within the counseling and psychology literature have typically addressed factors intrinsic to the counselor (i.e., education and training) and have not adequately addressed contextual work-related factors, such as organizational support of professional growth and development and organizational support of evidence-based practice (EBP) (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Colquitt, Lepine, & Noe, 2000; Konstam et al., in press). In the school counseling literature, researchers have identified barriers to developing professional growth due to inadequate supervision (i.e., administrative-focused supervision [Bultsma, 2012], insufficient clinical supervision [Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012], and/or no formal supervision [Wilczenski et al., 2010]). The goals of this study were to ascertain whether or not school counselors anticipate improvement in their professional functioning over time, and to identify variables associated with continued professional growth and development.

### **School Counselor Professional Competence**

Improving school counselors' professional competence, particularly as it relates to improving student outcomes, is mandated by the American School Counselor

Association Ethical Standards (ASCA, 2010) and current laws in the United States (Forman et al., 2009; Prasse, 2008). ASCA has had significant influence on the professional growth and development of school counselors. Specifically, when school counselors are practicing their professional duties that are consistent with the ASCA National Model, research has indicated that their students have more positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Sink & Stroh, 2003; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). In a related finding, Bordenhorn and Skaggs (2005) reported that school counselors well trained in the ASCA National Model are more likely to demonstrate professional self-efficacy and confidence. It is important to note that Bordenhorn and Skaggs' (2005) study did not include analysis of the impact of training in the ASCA National Model on professional growth and expertise.

Despite the positive impact of implementing comprehensive school counseling programs in accordance with the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012), professional school counselors and supervisors are arguably not in a position to effectively engage in and provide supervision following the ASCA National Model. Implementation of EBP, as indicated by the ASCA National Model, is one behavioral indicator of continued commitment to professional growth (Parsons, 2007). Given the importance of data-driven and evidence-based practices, there needs to be greater understanding regarding whether schools are in support of EBP, and if so how the organizational support of EBP influences school counselor professional development.

Emphasizing the implementation of EBP in schools is in alignment with current laws and mandates in the United States (Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007). EBP “challenges school counselors to test more rigorously the adequacy of their own

techniques as a means of ensuring current accountability and future success” (Parsons, 2007, p. viii). That is, implementation of EBP demands that school counselors critically examine their day-to-day functioning and align their professional practice with research evidence that involves measurement of intervention outcomes in relation to academic, social/emotional, or behavioral changes (Carey & Dimmitt, 2008). Commitment to implementation of EBP, a process that requires ongoing re-evaluation and refinement, positions school counselors to question their practice and experiment with possible solutions that are based on empirically-supported findings. Researchers have suggested that school counselors’ effective employment of EBP interventions and data-based decision-making translates to positive academic and developmental outcomes among students (Carey & Dimmitt, 2008; Dimmitt et al., 2007).

A study by McLaughlin, Rothery, Babins-Wagner, and Schleifer (2010) explored sources of information that facilitated or hampered the use of evidence-based knowledge among 40 direct practitioners employed in non-profit human service settings. The authors found that, when making decisions, practitioners were most inclined to rely on their experience, professional beliefs and values, and empathic understanding of their clients. Practitioners were least inclined to rely on research and professional literature, which is critical for successful implementation of EBPs in the schools. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) examined the impact of data-based decision-making in closing the achievement gap. She found that schools in high poverty areas that were the most successful in closing the achievement gap exhibited data-based decision-making. In addition, characteristics of the schools included purposeful leadership, commitment of the entire staff, and engagement in professional development. Factors specific to school

counselor expertise post formal academic training were not addressed in this research, nor were the individual and combined contribution of each of these factors with respect to added value considered.

School counselors often serve as mentors, coaches, and supervisors, although typically these roles are not clearly delineated within individual school settings and across school settings (Wilczenski et al., 2010). However, providing opportunities for mentorship and engaging in supervisory relationships are critical components in terms of effectively preparing school counselors not only as they enter the field (i.e., practicum and internship field placements), but also beyond the induction phase, throughout one's professional career. Such involvement not only serves to support school counselors' professional development and knowledge of changes in the field, but it also serves to promote job satisfaction and reduce stress levels (Wilczenski et al., 2010). Given the positive outcomes of engaging in supervisory and mentoring relationships, it is important to provide opportunities for school counselors to form and sustain these relationships.

Much research has focused on the supervisory process, including the importance of providing and receiving multicultural supervision (Daniels, D'Andrea, & Kim, 1999; Estrada, Frame, & Williams, 2004; Hird, Cavalieri, Dulko, Felice, & Ho, 2001; and Toporek, Ortega-Villalobos, Pope-Davis, 2004). Significant attention has also been placed on the communication process as it relates to the development of positive supervisory relationships (Garrett et al., 2001), and to models of supervision targeted toward development of mutually effective supervisory relationships (e.g., Lassiter, Napolitano, Culbreth, & Ng, 2008; Nelson et al., 2006; Ober, Granello, & Henfield, 2009;

and Studer, 2006). While the school counseling supervision literature is replete with various reviews and studies concerning supervision practices (e.g., Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012), supervision models (e.g., Cook et al., 2012), and multicultural supervision (e.g., West-Olatunji et al., 2011; Wilczenski et al., 2010), there is a dearth of literature addressing the impact of providing supervision on the development and growth of professional school counselors. Consequently, research is needed to examine supervision outcomes, specifically with respect to school counselors' pursuit of professional development.

Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) developed a stage theory for counselor development that included six phases: lay helper phase, beginning student phase, advanced student phase, novice professional phase, experienced professional phase, and senior professional phase. Continuous reflection related to professional experiences in general, and more specifically professional challenges encountered, are critical to each of the aforementioned phases. If professional reflection does not occur, stagnation follows. An attitude of openness to new learning is inherent to each stage of development with an accompanying attitude of respect for complexity and insight with respect to the counselor's capacities and limitations. While this counselor development theory has been applied to professional counselors, no such theory has been developed and applied to school counselors.

Relatedly, Colquitt et al. (2000) emphasized the importance of providing social support in the workplace when considering job performance. However, the focus on "situational characteristics such as support remains surprisingly rare" (p. 700). While there is school counseling research that has explored the importance of burnout

prevention, and potential interventions that include the provision of supportive contexts (e.g., Gunduz, 2012; Moyer, 2011), research focusing on factors that foster organizational support of professional development/educational growth, providing supervision in the schools, and EBP has been lacking. It is the intent of this research study to attend to this significant gap in the literature.

### **Purpose of Study**

Given the importance of providing data-driven (EBP) interventions, as described in the ASCA National Model, and employing culturally sensitive practices (ASCA, 2010), two areas of professional expertise were the focus of this study: the ability to consider and employ appropriate data-driven methods (EBPs) with students, including consideration of student cultural factors, and ability to intervene appropriately, based on assessment/data-driven considerations. We also examined areas of professional functioning as they related to contextual work-related factors (i.e., organizational support of EBP and educational growth) and intra-individual factors (i.e., experience in the field, engagement in continued learning experiences – training and workshops, and experience providing supervision in the field). It is important to determine if a supportive professional context, including support specific to EBP and support of educational growth, is related to level of functioning with respect to professional expertise and development among school counselors. We hypothesized that a supportive professional context would be associated with school counselors' self-perceived expertise.

The research questions in this study are as follows.

- (a) Are there relationships among organizational support of EBPs, organizational support of educational growth, and school counselors' self-perceived professional competency?

- (b) Is there a relationship between school counselor professional experience and self-reported engagement in formal learning experiences, including supervision of school counselors and attending formal training/workshops?

Further investigation of these research questions will assist counselor educators and practitioners in better understanding the development and professional growth of school counselors subsequent to completing formal academic training. Through the exploration of continued professional growth, we hope to present new perspectives and implications for counselor educators, practitioners, and supervisors that help to inform the implementation of EBP and continued professional development of school counselors.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were 85 school counselors registered as members of ASCA. Mailing addresses of 600 school counselors were provided by ASCA, and a survey was sent to each member. Participants were informed that their responses would remain anonymous. One hundred and thirty one school counselors completed the survey and returned it by mail, resulting in a 20.03% response rate (46 envelopes were returned due to incorrect addresses). Forty-six of the 131 returned questionnaires were not included in the analysis due to incomplete data.

The sample included a majority of female participants ( $n = 76, 89\%$ ). Additionally, most reported their race/ethnicity as White ( $n = 74, 87\%$ ), with few minority participants ( $n = 11, 13\%$ ). These percentages resemble the gender and ethnic composition of school counselors nationally, with approximately 77% of school counselors identifying as female and 75% of school counselors identifying as White (non-Latino [College Board, 2012]). Most participants reported having a master's degree as their highest

degree earned ( $n = 60$ , 71%) with the rest attaining a post-master's degree or doctorate ( $n = 25$ , 29%). The sample was found to be highly experienced, with only 6% ( $n = 5$ ) having less than 2 years of work experience. Additionally, 25% ( $n = 21$ ) reported having 2 to 4 years of work experience, 30% ( $n = 26$ ) reported having 5 to 10 years of experience, and 39% ( $n = 33$ ) reported having greater than 10 years of experience. Over half of the participants ( $n = 48$ , 57%) reported engagement in committee work within their profession, which points to a high level of involvement within their profession.

### **Procedures**

ASCA members were surveyed following research study approval by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Surveys were mailed to 600 ASCA members. Upon receipt of returned surveys, envelopes were separated from completed surveys to ensure anonymity. No incentive was provided to complete the survey. An a priori power analysis was conducted to determine the number of participants required to find a statistically significant effect using *G\*Power* (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). In setting an alpha level of .05, with a minimum power established at .80, and moderate effect size of .35, a minimum of 46 participants was needed to obtain statistical significance in conducting bivariate correlations. The power for conducting ANOVA analyses with the same parameters was achieved with 68 participants. All analyses were completed using SPSS Version 19.0 (IBM, 2010).

### **Instruments**

**The Professional Expertise and Organizational Support Survey.** The survey contained three subscales (Organizational Support of EBP, Organizational Support of

Educational Growth, and School Counseling Professional Expertise) was developed to measure professional expertise and organizational support of EBP and professional growth. It also included demographic items to assess school counselor intra-individual factors, including engagement in formal learning experiences, experience in the field as a school counselor, and experience supervising school counselors. The survey items were developed through incorporating key literature from school counseling and related fields, (e.g., business, counseling, and psychology), since the constructs measured had not been assessed directly in the school counseling literature. To ensure the items were applicable to school counseling practices, the survey was developed and piloted by two school counselor educators. It was subsequently administered to 86 graduates from a counseling program that reported working in a variety of settings, nine of whom worked in a school setting. Results from a reliability analysis of the previous survey administration were strong with a Cronbach's alpha of .80 or above on each subscale. Items that were identified by counselor educators as not applicable to school counseling practices were excluded from analysis.

**Organizational Support of Evidence-Based Practice Measure.** The scale was developed by the investigators to measure organizational support of EBP, and is based on the work of Pfeffer and Sutton (2006). Since the school counseling literature is limited with regards to how schools provide support to school counselors in the use of EBP, the business literature was referenced to guide development of items. The investigators also ensured the items coincided with school counseling EBPs. The scale was designed to measure the school's organizational culture in terms of support of EBP, and it contained four items on a 10-point Likert-type scale. A sample item used to

measure this construct was: To what extent does the following statement represent your organizational culture? Committed to evidence-based decision-making which means being committed to getting the best evidence and using it to guide actions. Using a factor analysis with principle components extraction, a single summative scale was found to account for 68.6% of the variance in the items, with an eigenvalue of 2.7. The summative scale ranged from 4 [low] to 40 [high]. A Cronbach's alpha of .84, 95% CI [.79, .88], was obtained for these questions.

**Organizational Support of Educational Growth Measure.** The instrument used to measure organizational support of educational growth was informed by the work of Colquitt et al. (2000). Their model examined predictors of motivation to learn and job performance. A five-item, 10-point Likert-type scale was designed by the investigators to assess characteristics of counselor work support of educational growth. The following is a sample item used to assess the school counselor's work setting: To what extent does your work setting provide experiences for professional growth and development? A factor analysis with principle components extraction confirmed a single summative scale accounted for 58.4% of the variance in the items, with an eigenvalue of 2.9. The five items were summed to create a range between 5 [low] and 50 [high]. In conducting a reliability analysis, a Cronbach's alpha of .88, 95% CI [.83, .91], was obtained for this instrument.

**The School Counseling Professional Expertise Questionnaire.** School counseling professional expertise was measured using a 10-question self-assessment instrument designed by the investigators to measure school counselor professional expertise and professional skills. Each question was measured using a 10-point Likert-

type scale. Participants were asked to determine how a strict but fair school counseling supervisor would rate their school counseling abilities and skills. Questions focused on two areas of functioning: ability to select and employ appropriate assessment methods, including consideration of cultural data, and ability to implement an intervention plan based on assessment considerations. In keeping with school counseling supervision literature that has emphasized the need to focus on school counselors' clinical expertise (e.g., Bultsma, 2012; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012), items for this scale focused on the counseling aspects of school counselors' work, with the goal of ascertaining the ongoing development of counseling skills as opposed to administrative skills. The following is a sample item from the scale: I am able to differentiate cultural data from idiosyncratic data. A factor analysis with principle component extraction was conducted to determine if a single summative scale could be utilized. Our results indicated that a single factor accounted for 51.4% of the variance in the items, with an eigenvalue of 5.14. A total sum scale was then created and had a range between 10 (low) and 100 (high) points. A Cronbach's alpha of .94, 95% CI [.92, .96] was obtained for the scale.

**School Counselor Intra-Individual Factors.** The investigators surveyed participants on intra-individual factors by collecting information on engagement in formal learning experiences, experience in the field as a school counselor, and experience supervising school counselors. Engagement in formal learning was measured by the number of workshops and courses participants reported to have taken during the past year. Additional questions assessed the number of workshops/courses attended for the following reasons: convenience, interest, and cost. Both years of experience in the field

and supervising school counselors were categorized into four levels using the following year ranges: less than 2 years, 2 to 4 years, 5 to 10 years, and greater than 10 years.

**Improvement in School-Related Counseling Skills.** A single item was created by the investigators to measure the self-reported expected improvement in school counseling-related skills. Participants were asked to respond to the question assessing whether or not they expected to improve in their school counseling-related skills. The response choice to this question was dichotomous, either 'yes' or 'no.' For those responding in the affirmative, participants were also asked to rate the amount they expected to improve on a 10-point Likert-type scale, with 10 being the highest amount of growth.

## **Results**

### **Research Question One**

Research question one asked: Are there relationships among organizational support of EBPs, organizational support of educational growth, and school counselors' self-perceived professional competency? To examine research question one, an ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean self-perceived professional competency based on the likelihood of improving school counseling-related skills, and correlations were calculated between expected improvement and organizational support of educational growth and EBP. Correlations were also calculated between the organizational support of educational growth and EBP with school counseling professional expertise. Participants were asked whether or not they thought they would improve in their school counseling-related skills. Participants reported a high degree of expected improvement in their school counseling-related skills, with 78% (n = 66)

responding in the affirmative. Younger participants were significantly more likely to respond in the affirmative,  $F(1,76) = 6.36, p = 0.01$ . No other demographic differences were found between the groups.

Mean differences in the School Counselor Professional Expertise Questionnaire were found for the affirmative group,  $F(1, 78) = 9.18, p = .003$ . Reported means for those expecting to improve their school counseling-related skills were significantly higher ( $M = 68.6, SD = 16.8$ ) than those not expecting to improve ( $M = 50.0, SD = 26.2$ ). This indicated that participants with higher reported expertise also expected to improve, indicating a perception of greater school-counselor-related skill level.

The difference in self-reported assessments was further explored. For those who answered in the affirmative to whether they would continue to improve in their school counseling-related skills, a significant correlation was found between the degree to which they assessed they would improve and their self-reported school counseling expertise,  $r(59) = .44, p < .001$ . Those with higher self-reported expertise also reported that they would continue to grow to a higher degree professionally.

Next, scores on the Organizational Support of Educational Growth Measure were examined in relation to scores on the School Counseling Professional Expertise Questionnaire and were found to have no relationship,  $r(83) = .02, p = .83$ . Self-reported school counseling expertise was not related to the amount of organizational support of educational growth. No mean differences in Organizational Support of Educational Growth were found between those expecting growth and those not expecting growth,  $F(1, 78) = 0.00, p = .99$ . However, there was a strong positive correlation between the amount of expected growth and the Organizational Support of Educational Growth,  $r(59)$

= .31,  $p = .02$ . Within all the individuals responding affirmatively to expecting their expertise to grow, those individuals with higher levels of Organizational Support of Educational Growth also reported higher levels of expected improvement.

Lastly, we found no relationship between the scores on the Organizational Support of EBP Measure and scores on the School Counseling Professional Expertise Questionnaire,  $r(83) = .06$ ,  $p = .58$ . No significant differences were found between those who expected growth and those who did not expect growth,  $F(1, 77) = 0.11$ ,  $p = .92$ , and for those expecting growth, no relationship was found between the amount of expected growth and the Organizational Support of EBP Measure,  $r(59) = -.04$ ,  $p = .74$ .

### **Research Question Two**

Research question two asked: Is there a relationship between school counselor professional experience and self-reported engagement in formal learning experiences, including supervision of school counselors and attending formal training/workshops? Research question two was analyzed using a correlational analysis, with follow-up ANOVAs conducted. A correlational analysis was conducted to ascertain the influence of the following intrinsic variables related to counselor experience and formal learning experiences on school counselor professional expertise: (a) workshops/courses attended; (b) convenience in attending workshops/courses; (c) interest in attending workshops/courses; (d) cost to attend workshops/courses; (e) years of experience in the field; and (f) years supervising others. See Table 1 for correlations between all variables.

**Table 1**  
*Correlations Between Study Factors*

	OSEG M	OSEBP	Courses	Yrs. Exp. F	Yrs. Exp. S	Conv	Int	Cost
PES <sup>a</sup>	.02	.06	.18	.19	.31**	-.03	-.11	-.05
OSEGM <sup>b</sup>		.56***	.09	-.01	.13	-.10	.07	.20
OSEBP <sup>c</sup>			.14	-.12	.07	.19	-.10	.02
Courses <sup>d</sup>				.03	-.17	.16	-.18	.02
Yrs Exp F <sup>e</sup>					.59***	.26*	.01	.02
Yrs Exp S <sup>f</sup>						.16	.01	.10
Conv <sup>g</sup>							-.33**	-.32**
Int <sup>h</sup>								-.12

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup>PES: Professional expertise scale

<sup>b</sup>OSEGM: Organizational Support of Educational Growth Measure

<sup>c</sup>OSEBP: Organizational Support of Evidence-Based Practice Measure

<sup>d</sup>Courses: Number of workshops/courses

<sup>e</sup>Yrs. Exp. F: Years of experience in field

<sup>f</sup>Yrs. Exp. S: Years of experience supervising

<sup>g</sup>Conv: Convenience of workshops/courses

<sup>h</sup>Int: Interest in workshops /courses; Cost: Cost of attending workshop/courses

Those counselors with greater years of supervising experience reported greater school counselor professional expertise,  $r(83) = .31, p < .01$ . To further explore this significant effect, an ANOVA was conducted to compare average self-reported ratings of school counselor expertise based on years of supervision experience. Supervision experience was separated into four groups: less than 2, 2 to 4, 5 to 10, and greater than 10 years. Significant differences were found between the four groups,  $F(3, 81) = 4.41, p = .006$ . The group with the highest reported mean rating of expertise were those with greater than 10 years of supervision experience,  $M = 77.48, SD = 13.16$ . Post-hoc tests using Tukey's HSD indicated this mean to be significantly greater than those with less than two years of supervision experience,  $M = 60.57, SD = 17.76$ . Although not

significant from either of the previous two means, those with 2 to 4 years of supervision experience and those with 5 to 10 years of supervision experience fell between the two previous values ( $M = 65.59$ ,  $SD = 23.92$ ;  $M = 61.33$ ,  $SD = 21.18$ ; respectively).

In examining relationships between engagement in formal learning experiences with counselor expertise, convenience in attending workshops/conferences was significantly correlated with years of experience in the field,  $r(69) = .26$ ,  $p < .05$ . No other significant relationships were found between engagement in formal learning experiences with counselor expertise. Next, mean differences were analyzed between participants that expected to continue to grow professionally and those that reported no expectation for continued growth in counselor expertise. We found those counselors that expected to grow had a higher reported mean number of courses/workshops attended for convenience ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 6.07$ ,  $p = .016$ , as compared to those who did not expect to grow ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Additionally, the average number of years in the field was significantly lower for those that reported an expected growth ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ),  $F(1, 82) = 5.66$ ,  $p = .02$ , as compared to those who did not expect growth in expertise ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Those school counselors that attended a greater number of workshops/courses overall, as well as those who attended out of convenience alone, reported higher levels of expected growth in school counselor expertise.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the factors that sustain and nurture professional growth subsequent to formal academic training among school counselors. Analyses were conducted to determine the effects of both intra-

individual factors and work-related organizational factors on professional expertise and development. When examining school counselors' level of expected growth in professional expertise, for those who reported an expected growth, we found that organizational support of educational growth was a significant contributor. Higher levels of organizational support of educational growth were correlated with higher reported levels of expected growth in expertise. Results support the importance of contextual factors, such as organizational support of educational growth.

Correlational relationships between six variables were conducted, including: number of workshops/courses taken, convenience in attending workshops/courses, years supervising others, interest in attending workshops/courses, cost to attend workshops/courses, and years of experience in the field. Significant relationships were obtained between years of experience supervising others and school counselor self-reported expertise, a finding that confirms the importance of engagement in supervision by school counselors. Additionally, school counselors that reported attending a greater number of courses/workshops, as well as those who attended out of convenience, reported higher levels of expected growth in school counselor expertise.

Supervision is critical to fostering competence, and is perhaps the primary route by which school counselors and their trainees learn about the practices of their profession (Ladany & Bradley, 2010; Studer, 2006). The experience of supervision appears not only to benefit the supervisee; our results suggest that the supervisory process is also beneficial to the supervisor, putting into motion the possibility of a positive reciprocal feedback loop in terms of continued professional growth and expertise between supervisors and their supervisees. As number of years of experience

in the field was not significantly correlated to self-reported expertise, it appears that engagement in the supervision process is the catalyst for the increase in reported competence levels. On the other hand, the finding could also indicate that supervisors are more likely to be chosen from those who have greater professional expertise. Nonetheless, findings suggest that engaging in supervisory experiences is beneficial to supporting the self-development of school counselors. Given the leadership role that is emphasized by the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012), results suggest that school counselors can benefit from developing greater expertise serving both as mentors and supervisors (Bultsma, 2012; Wilczenski et al., 2010). As counselor educators prepare school counselors to enter the profession, they can emphasize the importance of maintaining ongoing professional development and expertise in the area of supervision, as it pertains to both receiving and providing supervision.

The motivational determinants informing participants' choice to supervise are unknown and are beyond the scope of this study. They are likely to be multi-determined, and informed, in part, by the quest for excellence. Personality traits, such as the need to succor, are also likely to inform the decision to supervise. In a study conducted by Newgent, Higgins, Mulvenon, and Balkin (2005), findings indicated that experienced supervisors were more likely to exhibit personality traits of openness and trust and less likely to exhibit vulnerability. In addition, school counselors who elect to supervise over time may be motivated by the desire to reflect about their work in relation to current practices. The work of Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) suggested this possibility, although their focus was on counselors.

Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) posited a stage theory for counselor development that includes six phases of counselor development spanning from the initial helper phase to the senior professional phase. Counselors engage in continuous reflection related to professional experiences and challenges as they navigate the different phases of counselor development. The continuous reflection inherent to this model is consistent with the ASCA Ethical Standards, section E.1.f., which emphasizes the importance of school counselors maintaining professional competency through engaging in personal self-awareness and professional effectiveness (ASCA, 2010). Researchers have also identified the benefit of facilitating professional growth through the application of developmental models (e.g., Gibbs & Magnus, 2010; Studer, 2006). Given the focus of Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) stage theory model on openness to learning and willingness to examine one's capacities and limitations as they pertain to professional development, this model could be beneficial in its application to school counselor professional growth. Further research efforts related to the supervision process would be fruitful.

Results from an ANOVA comparing years of supervision and school counselor professional expertise revealed that school counselors with ten or more years of supervision experience were significantly different from those with less than two years of supervision experience. The trend showed higher professional expertise as years of supervision increased. One possible explanation for the results obtained is that supervision of school counselors is a nuanced and complex process that requires time for reflection and mastery. These findings are supported by results from a study conducted by Newgent et al. (2005), which suggested that as supervisors gain more

experience providing supervision, they are less likely to report feelings of vulnerability and more likely to express security and confidence in their counseling decisions.

Reflecting on one's own work as well as the work of a supervisee, and revisiting issues as they present themselves in the supervisory process, allows for further exploration and greater in-depth understanding of what is often a complex, nuanced, and at times a contradictory process (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

In a seminal article, Worthington (2006) reviewed the counseling supervision literature and concluded that supervisors do not improve in functioning with experience. Supervisors receive little training in how to be effective in their role and may repeat their mistakes over time. Our findings suggest that supervisors who have had experience (beyond ten years) perfecting the skills of supervision perceived increased competency in role functioning. One cannot rule out the possibility that supervisors do *change* with experience (Worthington, 2006). They may contribute in more nuanced and different ways, providing different resources to the supervisory experience that cannot be captured via traditional measurement tools. As Houser and Thoma (2013) astutely noted, competent supervision is critical when considering professional development. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms likely to promote professional growth among supervisors and supervisees, and possible linkages to positive student outcomes.

### **Findings Related to School Counselor Intra-Individual Factors**

Results indicated that 78% of the 85 participants anticipated that they would continue to grow professionally, while 10% did not. Approximately 12% stated they did not anticipate taking additional coursework. These results must be interpreted

cautiously, given that participants were asked to anticipate their behavior with respect to professional growth. There is no data to the researchers' knowledge to confirm that intent to pursue future professional growth activities translates into actual participation in professional growth activities. The assessments made by participants may be linked to temperamental and personality differences, such as optimism and agreeableness as well as positive response bias (Kahneman, 2011). Nonetheless, the number of conferences/workshops attended overall, including those attended for convenience sake, was also found to significantly increase the reported levels of expected growth. Involvement in continuing education and learning experience was found to lead to higher levels of expected growth, even if the learning experiences were attended for sheer convenience. This finding would imply that counselors who seek convenient learning experiences have higher levels of expected improvement. In light of this finding, it may be beneficial for counselor educators and supervisors to develop students' and supervisees' curiosity and desire to learn new information and practices.

### **Findings Related to Organizational Support of EBPs**

No linear relationship was found between scores on the Organizational Support of EBP Measure, Organizational Support of Educational Growth Measure, and scores on the School Counseling Professional Expertise Questionnaire. Although we found no significant relationship, EBP implementation is likely to thrive in a context where the individual, as well as the system in which he or she is embedded, embrace and respect the scientific inquiry process (Dimmitt et al., 2007; Parsons, 2007). Results by Konstam et al. (in press) suggested that organizational support of EBP is an important variable to consider with respect to understanding the factors that promote counselor development

and expertise. Engagement in the workplace was found to be a significant mediator in the relationship between organizational support of EBP and mental health counselors' professional expertise. Research findings have suggested that willingness to adapt EBP to fit unique settings is the best predictor of successful EBP implementation, including positive attitudes toward EBP (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Rapp et al., 2008). It may be that school settings, in comparison to mental health settings, are less likely to have the necessary supports associated with successful implementation of EBP. For example, school counselors may be required to engage in too many administrative tasks, precluding effective delivery of comprehensive services (Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009). Time being taken away from delivering comprehensive services could be indicative of insufficient organizational support for effective implementation of EBP. Aarons, Sommerfeld, Hecht, Silovski, and Chaffin (2009) found that consistent supportive consultations are critical to successful implementation of EBP in child services settings. Consequently, further research exploring the relationship between EBP and school counselor professional development is warranted. The work of Rotheram-Borus, Swendeman and Chorpita (2012) has offered interesting new paradigms that may well inform EPBs in the schools.

Given the findings of researchers as mentioned above (e.g., Aarons et al., 2009; Rotheram-Borus et al., 2012), there is a need for school counselors to receive ongoing supervision that incorporates discussions addressing the use of EBP. Rapp et al. (2008) identified critical strategies that produced successful outcomes and positive attitudes toward EPBs by staff. They included: (a) setting of expectations by managers and monitoring EBP use of front-line staff; (b) having members of upper management serve

as “champions” of EBP by proactively keeping organizational focus on EBPs; (c) educating all staff on the importance of EBPs rather than just the staff targeted for using EBPs as part of their job responsibilities; and (d) creating leadership teams that include representatives from all levels of responsibility within the organization to monitor progress and identify obstacles to implementing EBPs. Similarly, in a survey developed to assess EBP implementation in community mental health settings, Carlson, Rapp, and Eichler (2010) found that the key components of successful implementation of EBP were team meetings, professional development and skill building activities, and use of outcome measures to track progress.

An effective strategy for receiving feedback pertaining to the use of EBP could include the presentation of ideas for EBP at SST (Student Support Team) meetings. However, increased opportunities to focus on the development and implementation of EBPs are needed in school settings (Carey & Dimmitt, 2008). In fact, Carey and Dimmitt (2008) developed a model of EBP for school counselors that included three steps: (a) problem description (identifying what needs to be addressed); (b) outcome research use (ascertaining what is likely to work); and (c) intervention evaluation (employing data-based analysis to assess whether the intervention made a difference). However, further research is needed to investigate ways to assist school counselors in implementing EBP, while also supporting and developing positive attitudes toward employing EBP, as identified by Rapp and colleagues’ (2008) research.

It is important to note that the current study did not assess individual attitudes and commitment to EBP; rather, we assessed participants’ perceptions regarding organizational support of EBP in their respective schools. Further research is needed to

determine if and *how* systemic implementation of EBP, in addition to individual commitment to implementation of EBP, is implicated in terms of continued professional growth and expertise among school counselors. Reinforcement of attention to data that links school counselor efforts with positive student outcomes can serve as a catalyst for continued professional development, specifically as it relates to the implementation of EBP. For example, through supervision, school counselors could share outcome data representative of their interventions to assess and reinforce the use of EBP. Sharing successful outcomes of student-focused interventions could help to further stimulate and sustain school counselors' development and excitement for implementing EBP.

### **Limitations**

The current study is characterized by several limitations. It is important to note that causality cannot be imputed in terms of the findings; longitudinal studies across a variety of cultural and school contexts that focus on the supervision process would be needed to address issues related to causality. All participants were ASCA members practicing in the United States, a self-selected group that chooses to affiliate with other practicing members in the field. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are just over 107,000 K through 12 public school counselors (Sable & Plotts, 2010), and ASCA has 29,000 members (J. Cook, personal communication, August 10, 2011). Results cannot be generalized to all practicing school counselors given that only 27.1% of practicing professionals belong to ASCA.

A further limitation with respect to generalizability of our findings is due to the low response rate (20%), which resulted in only a select number of ASCA members chose to respond to the questionnaire. Participants in this study were highly educated in

comparison to the general national population of school counselors, with 29% having coursework beyond their master's degree. There are other indicators that the members who responded were not representative of practicing school counselors. Participants were asked to report whether they engaged in committee work within the profession of school counseling: 57% of the sample reported involvement, while 43% reported no involvement. This statistic suggests a highly engaged and committed sample of school counselors.

Finally, measurement of school counselor professional expertise relied on the respondents' self-report. Construct validity would be enhanced if additional measurements were used, including the use of seasoned external evaluators who are experts in the field. Incorporating student outcomes and linking them to school counselor professional expertise would be beneficial in future studies. Given the dearth of research efforts, our findings serve an important function in beginning to build a foundation of research literature in a relatively unexplored area of study in the school counseling professional development literature.

### **Conclusion**

Results of the study suggest that a significant majority of school counselors anticipated continued professional growth and development after formal academic training. School counselors with higher scores on a self-report instrument designed to assess professional expertise were more likely to participate in the supervision of others. No linear relationship was found between organizational support of EBP and educational growth and perceived professional expertise, a finding that is in contrast to reported findings with mental health counselors (Konstam et al., in press). It is possible

that the necessary structural supports for successful implementation of EBP in the schools by school counselors are likely to be lacking (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Rapp et al., 2008). It may be that school settings, in comparison to mental health settings, are less likely to have in place the structural and organizational supports that are mandated by managed care for successful implementation of EBP and educational pursuits.

Further study with a diverse sample of school counselors is needed in order to address the issues raised by this research study. By identifying factors associated with improved functioning among school counselors across a variety of cultures and school contexts, counselor educators and supervisors can help to create pathways that are most likely to influence positive outcomes among school counselors, with the goal of significantly impacting student achievement.

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