School Counselor Self-Efficacy in Advocating for Self: How Prepared Are We?

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Abstract

Advocacy is a central component of providing comprehensive school counseling programs. Often, counselor advocacy entails advocating for the profession and clients. Utilizing the New General Self-Efficacy scale, this quantitative study examined the effect of advocacy training type, counselor education program level, and CACREP program attendance on the self-efficacy of school counselors in advocating for self. School counselors' self-efficacy in advocating for self (as a school counselor), rather than advocacy for the profession and/or students, was assessed. Analysis revealed advocacy training was a statistically significant predictor of self-efficacy in advocating for self, while program level and CACREP attendance were not significant predictors. Implications for counselor preparation and counselor education are discussed.

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School counselors are tasked with many roles within the schools in which they are employed. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) states the role of the school counselor is to promote the development of a comprehensive school counseling program that affords equity and access to education promoting student success for all students (ASCA, nd). Counselors accomplish this via "leadership, advocacy, and collaboration" (ASCA, nd, p. 1). With this, ASCA recommends a student-counselor ratio of 250:1; that 80 percent or more of school counselor time is spent on direct and indirect service – as outlined in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019a); and, no more than 20 percent of counselors' time is spent on program management (ASCA, 2019b). Often, the manifestation of these roles is up to school administrators. Having varying views of the school counselor's role leaves room for improper duties, misuse of time, and an increased need for advocacy on the part of the school counselor.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) embraces advocacy as a central tenet of its initiatives (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). The original authors of the Advocacy Competencies for School Counselors (Trusty & Brown, 2005) contended knowledge and skill in advocacy are essential to school counselors providing comprehensive service to students. The authors called for research in understanding the factors that affect school counselor advocacy. The purpose of this article is to answer this call and to do so with a particular focus on aspects of training, competence, and efficacy concerning advocacy efforts of school counselors in advocating for themselves. This study is unique to previous studies on the topic of advocacy in that, generally, when our profession discusses advocacy, it is implied advocacy for the profession and our clients. Research has focused on school counselor advocacy for the profession (Cigrand et al., 2015; Dawnette et al., 2015); social justice change (McMahan et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2010); advocacy for gifted students and students with disabilities (Dipeolu et al., 2014); and sexual minority students (Bidell, 2011; Simons

et al., 2016). Essentially, self-advocacy can be defined apart from professional advocacy or student advocacy. In such light, we seek to better understand how efficacious school counselors are in advocating on their behalf, as individuals.

Self-Efficacy

According to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), individuals do not merely operate according to their environments, but are also active agents in their lives and thinking (Bandura, 1999, 2001). Humans are capable of forming, filtering, and deciding their course of actions through behavior, cognitive, and environmental events (Ooi et al., 2017). Experiences and memories are stored and processed within our minds, influencing our choices and behaviors. An individual's behavior is a result of personal perceptions or beliefs and interpretations of environmental factors (Corey, 2009), prompting motivation and the expectation of desirable outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1994, 1999, 2001). Human agency, or intentionality of our actions, has at its foundation - efficacy (Bandura 1999, 2001). Unless an individual believes that they are capable of producing desired outcomes, they have little incentive to act (Usher, 2009). In other words, the lack of a favorable result from action yields a lack of desire to act.

This theory is based on the assumption that expectations of perceived personal efficacy, otherwise known as self-efficacy, are created and strengthened by psychological procedures (Bandura, 1977). To influence one's behavior, people have to believe that they can perform the needed task to have the desired outcome (Bandura, 1977, 1994, 1999; Haley et al., 2015). A lack of belief in personal capability can hinder the attempt of a task. Increased self-efficacy increases efforts and the sustainability of efforts (Bandura, 1977, 1994). From professional to personal development, self-efficacy is associated with the mastery of goals that are influenced by cognitive processing (Bandura, 1977, 1994; Ooi et al., 2017). Four primary sources of information:

performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal, inform self-efficacy beliefs (Morrison & Lent, 2018).

It is important to note this theory is based on the premise of overcoming fear and obstacles; however, such can be expanded to all tasks. Self-efficacy is not exclusive to the belief in one's own ability to learn. It is defined by an individual's confidence that they will be successful in the future by completing a particular sequence of behaviors or tasks, even when experiencing social pressure (Bandura, 1977, 1994, 1999; Gündüz, 2012; Holden et al., 2017; Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Performance accomplishments hinge on one's successes and are most influential (Bandura, 1977, 1994).

Counseling self-efficacy is related to a counselor's performance such as their competence and use of effective counseling strategies (Butts & Gutierrez, 2018; Gündüz, 2012; Wei et al., 2015). Research on counselor self-efficacy has been associated with a counselors' confidence in their capabilities to procure positive change through therapy, and, can be increased through course training and experience (Morrison & Lent, 2018). For school counselors, Mullen and Lambie (2016) found that higher self-efficacy relates to a higher likelihood of programmatic service delivery. Additionally, the atmosphere or climate of the school can be directly related to counselors' self-efficacy (Haron et al., 2010). Particularly, a positive environment of support and collaboration increases self-efficacy (Gündüz, 2012; Haron et al., 2010).

Self-Advocacy

As a central tenant of the profession, counselors are charged with advocating for changes that improve individuals' and groups' quality of life, eliminating barriers, and promoting equality at the individual, group, and systemic levels (ACA, 2014). ASCA defines school counselors as collaborative educational team members that advocate for systemic change in both the school and

community (ASCA, 2016, 2019). Self-advocacy involves meeting and communicating one's needs and rights while maintaining the respect of self and others (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Skinner, 1998). School counselor advocacy refers to the skills, awareness, and ability necessary for school counselors to better serve students and to assert one's roles via effective communication (ASCA, 2019; Clemons et al., 2011; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Field and Baker (2004) conducted a qualitative study to examine school counselors' definition of advocacy and advocacy practices of high school counselors. Themes that emerged from the study suggested advocacy as being student-focused, doing all for the student, going above and beyond to best support the needs of students, as well as supporting colleagues via advocating for each other (Field & Baker, 2004). For marginalized students, in particular, counseling services can be essential (ASCA, 2019). The impact of discrimination, poverty, and injustice can be reduced through effective school counseling advocacy (Bidell, 2011; McMahan et al., 2010). School counselors who serve as leaders and advocates within the school can increase academic possibilities, resulting in improved student outcomes and college and career opportunities (Young & Bryan, 2015), as well as promote a safe and supportive environment for students (Bidell, 2011; Dipeolu et al., 2014; Simons et al., 2016).

Others suggest school counseling advocacy is professional advocacy – a separate entity from student advocacy (Havlik et al., 2019), defined by communication of personal interests, rights, and needs (Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Brinckerhoff, 1994). Cigrand et al. (2015) define school counseling advocacy as "efforts to promote awareness and support for their professional role" (p. 10). Advocating for the profession and roles have been seen as best practice for supporting and inadvertently advocating for students (Gibson et al., 2012; Havlik et al., 2019). As school counselors' roles are often misconstrued, it is expected for the focus of advocacy to be upon

defining those roles for others. The question remains: can school counselors advocate for their defined roles without the efficacy to advocate for themselves? School counselors, along with other educators, are known to teach students to advocate for themselves (Amstramovich & Harris, 2007; Walker & Test, 2011). It is logical to teach school counselors the same. School counselors engage in advocacy efforts throughout their day-to-day operations and expected duties (Clemens et al., 2011). However, school counselors are often asked to perform services outside their assigned role that are deemed inappropriate or unrelated to the profession (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Clemens et al., 2011; Mullen et al., 2018; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Stone & Zirkel, 2010). These inappropriate duties can cause role confusion and may create a conflict of interest between students and their families, or teachers (Clemens et al., 2011). Additionally, school counselors may experience burnout, as complications develop between the professional role and the environment in which they work (Aliyev & Tunc, 2015).

Counselor burnout is prevalent in the literature. School counselor burnout, in particular, can be attributed to a high level of internal and external demands, stress, as well as competing messages about expectations of their roles (Bardhoshi et al, 2014; Holman et al., 2019; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). Gündüz (2012) found a negative correlation between school counselor self-efficacy and sub-dimensions of burnout. In particular, the study suggested that counselors with increased social support had higher self-efficacy and lower burnout. To increase self-efficacy, establish consistency, and avoid burnout, school counselors should engage in self-advocacy to define the expected and appropriate duties and to maintain their counselor role within the school (Clemens et al, 2011). A school counselor who can adequately self-advocate and has increased self-efficacy (Mullen & Lambie, 2016) may better create and facilitate a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes student success.

Some are reluctant to advocate. Such reluctance stems from a counselor's perceived belief in a lack of skill, personality, value set, and resources to advocate (Eriksen, 1999). However, the very traits that make for a good counselor (i.e. listening, relationship and rapport building, clarifying, etc.), are what contribute to successful advocacy. Further barriers to advocacy noted are resistance and structural barriers (González, 2016). School counselors reported receiving resistance to advocating for LGBT students by school staff, families, and stakeholders. Large caseloads, lack of time, and lack of support also act as structural barriers to advocacy (Stone & Zirkel, 2010; González, 2016). School counselors can face a crossroads of ethically following advocacy guidelines (Trusty & Brown, 2005) and adhering to the regulations or laws of the administration and school district (Stone & Zirkel, 2010).

Training

Within counselor education programs, the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012), the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014), and the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2016), counselors are tasked with advocating for the clients, students, and the profession. Counselors-in-training have the opportunity to learn about advocacy efforts established within the curriculum guided by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related and Educational Programs (CACREP). The purpose of the CACREP standards is to provide leadership and promote excellence in professional preparation. Section 5.G of the standards (CACREP, 2016) outlines specific behavior and guidelines for programs with a specialty in school counseling. Programs should prepare school counselors to serve as leaders and advocates in P-12 schools (Section 5.G.2.a) and to acquire competencies to advocate for their roles (Section 5.G.2.f).

The counseling profession depends on advocacy for sustainability (ACA, 2014; Erikson, 1999). "Before people can successfully promote themselves as a group or individuals, they need to know and have confidence in what they are promoting" (Eriksen, 1999, p. 41). One should be educated in advocacy efforts before advocating (Eriksen, 1999). We extend this notion to school counselors' advocacy of self. One should have confidence in their abilities and work to successfully promote themselves as individuals. In a review of the literature, the presence of empirical research on counselors' ability to advocate for themselves is lacking or non-existent. Recognizing this gap, the researchers sought to investigate factors related to school counselor self-efficacy in advocating for self. Using quantitative methodology, this study was guided by the following research question: Do advocacy training, degree level, and attendance of a CACREP institution affect school counselors' self-efficacy in advocating for self?

Method

Participants

Licensed school counselors who practice as a school counselor within a (pre-)K-12 public school participated in this study. A total of eighty-five (N=85) responses were received. Of the participants, sixty-six (77.7%) reported being Licensed Professional School Counselors. Respondents could report other licensure and credentials. Participants self-reported being Provisionally Licensed School Counselors (7.1%), Licensed Professional Counselors (21.2%), Licensed Professional Counselor Associates (3.5%), Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisors (1.2%), National Certified Counselors (22.4%), and other credentials such as teaching license (21.2%). Participants were asked to indicate their highest degree level in counselor education. More than the majority of respondents (74.1%) held a MA/MS degree in counselor education, while 2.4% were pursuing such at the time of the study. Nearly eighteen percent (17.6%) of

respondents were pursuing a Ph.D. or Ed.D. in counselor education at the time of the study, and 5.9% held a Ph.D. As training is a key variable within this study, it was important to ascertain if participants attended a CACREP or non-CACREP institution. The majority (77.6%) of respondents reported attending a CACREP program.

Additionally, seventy-four (87.1%) of respondents reported being female, eleven (12.9%) male. Sixty-one (71.8%) of respondents self-reported a race/ethnicity of White (Non-Hispanic), fifteen (17.7%) African American/Black, one (1.18%) Asian, two (2.4%) Latino/Hispanic, four (4.71%) Multiracial, and two (2.4%) reported Other. The average ages of respondents were 38-43 years (SD = 1.73).

Measures

The *New General Self-Efficacy Scale* (NGSE; Chen et al., 2001) measures one's belief in being able to complete a demand. The NGSE is an eight-item 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 5 (*strongly agree)*. The scale was modified for the current study to gauge self-advocating tasks. Participants were asked to consider their position of advocating for themselves (not the profession) within their role as a school counselor. The total score was used. A primary draw for using this measure in this study was its solid psychometric properties. Chen and colleagues (2001) noted the content validity of the NGSE was high and had a robust internal consistency reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .86$). The NGSE also was seen to be the best tool in measuring one's efficacy in self-advocacy, versus skill such as within the School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire (SCSAQ; Clemens et al., 2011).

Demographics were also collected. Participants self-reported race/ethnicity, gender, age, attendance in a CACREP program, self-advocacy training, and the highest level of counselor education completed. The analysis included the latter three variables. Respondents were asked,

"Did/do you attend a CACREP-accredited counseling/school counseling program?" and answered yes or no. For self-advocacy training, respondents were asked, "Have you received training in advocacy of: (Select all that apply.) Students, The Profession, Self (as a School Counselor)." For counselor education, "What is your highest completed level of counselor education?" was asked (choices included: MA, MS; Ph.D.; Ed.D.; Currently pursuing MA or MS; Currently pursuing Ph.D. or Ed.D.).

Procedure

Institutional Review Board approval was sought prior to data collection within this study. Following approval, a call for participants was nationally distributed via email to separate counselor listservs the first author is a member of. Participants who met the study criteria: a) licensed school counselor and b) practicing as a school counselor within a (pre-)K-12 public school at the time of the study, were invited to complete the 5-10 minute survey. Recruitment emails, and subsequent social media posts, provided a link to an electronic survey which was administered via university SurveyShare. Upon visiting the designated SurveyShare site, participants encountered a consent form that outlined the purpose of the study, participant selection, risks and benefits of participation, volunteerism, confidentiality, a statement of fair treatment and respect, and a certificate of consent. Those who consented to participate were instructed to continue to the survey. After two weeks of recruitment, a modification was approved by the IRB which allowed the call for participants to be distributed via social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Recruitment expanded over a total course of four weeks. It is unknown the number of school counselors reached within recruitment. Participants who opted to voluntarily complete the survey did so anonymously.

Data Analysis

Screening for missing data, outliers, and assumptions was conducted before running a multiple regression analysis, using a stepwise method, to predict self-efficacy in advocacy of self from attendance in a self-advocacy training, CACREP program, and highest level of counselor education completed. There were no missing values or outliers. The independent variables were examined for collinearity. VIF statistics were all less than 2.0, indicating no problems with multicollinearity and singularity. The analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 26 software. The training variable was entered into the regression in Model 1. CACREP participation was entered in Model 2. Level of counselor education completed was entered in Model 3.

Results

The means and standard deviations for the variables are reported in Table 1. The unstandardized regression coefficients (B) and intercept, the standardized regression coefficients (β), and t-values are reported in Table 2. Model 1 accounted for 6.5% of the variance in participants' self-efficacy, $F(1, 83) = 5.79$, $p=.02$, $R^2 = .065$, adjusted $R^2 = .054$. Model 2 accounted for 6.7%, $F(1, 82) = .181$, $p=.67$, $R^2 = .067$, adjusted $R^2 = .044$. Model 3 accounted for 7.4%, $F(1, 81) = .562$, $p=.46$, $R^2 = .074$, adjusted $R^2 = .039$. Self-advocacy training (trng_) was a statistically significant predictor of self-efficacy in advocacy of self ($p=.02$). Though CACREP attendance (cacrep_) was negatively correlated to self-efficacy and highest completed level of counselor education (EDUC) was positively correlated to self-efficacy, there was no statistical significance.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, NGSE, cacrep_, trng_, and EDUC

Measures	M	SD

Intercept	3.89	.71
cacrep_	1.22	.42
trng_	2.40	.74
EDUC	1.84	1.56

Table 2

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (B) and Intercept, the Standardized Regression Coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values

Model	Measures	B	β	t	p
1	Intercept	3.31		13.07	<.001
	trng_	.24	.255	2.41	.018
2	Intercept	3.40		10.19	<.001
	trng_	.243	.256	2.40	.019
	cacrep_	-.076	-.045	-.425	.672
3	Intercept	3.35		9.81	<.001
	trng_	.236	.249	2.32	.023
	cacrep_	-.077	-.045	-.425	.672
	EDUC	.036	.081	.750	.456

A little over fifty percent (55.3%) of respondents reported receiving training in advocacy of self (as a School Counselor) while 29.4% reported having received training in advocacy of students or the profession only. Oddly, 15.3% of respondents did not report receiving any advocacy training.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to explore factors that impact school counselor self-efficacy in the area of self-advocacy, apart from the student or profession, as this is an area of research that is unexplored in the current literature. Results suggest training type contributes to school counselors' self-efficacy in advocating for self. In the current study, participants were asked to indicate if they received training in advocacy of students, the profession, and self (as a school counselor). Unsurprisingly, findings indicated participants who received more training in advocacy of self had more self-efficacy in advocating for self. In a quasi-experimental study where teachers engaged in authentic learning exercises within their course training, teachers' self-efficacy to perform bullying prevention activities (which can be categorized as advocacy) increased (Banas, 2014). Further research indicates teaching African American college students with disabilities self-advocacy practices had a positive effect on students' ability to engage in self-advocacy actions (Walker & Test, 2011). Goldsmith (2011) similarly found counselor self-efficacy to be a significant predictor of advocacy activity. Recall self-efficacy is associated with the mastery of goals that are influenced by cognitive processing and can increase one's efforts and sustainability (Bandura, 1977, 1994; Ooi et al., 2017). Self-efficacy can be vital in one's performance and persistence (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005).

The present study found no statistically significant relationship between school counselor self-advocacy self-efficacy and CACREP program completion. In an exploration of self-efficacy for the advocacy of gifted students, Goldsmith (2011) found no significant difference in school counselor advocacy competency between school counselors who received CACREP training and those who did not. Further, the present study found no statistical significance in years of education on the self-efficacy of school counselors to self-advocate. This may be explained by over the

majority of respondents being within the same degree level - possessing a master's degree or pursuing such. Only 5.6% of respondents possessed a doctoral degree.

Implications

Previous research indicates school counselors report high levels of burnout (Wilkerson, 2009). School counselor burnout is linked to high levels of professional demand (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Holman et al., 2019) and role confusion (Clemens et al., 2011). It is critical, then, school counselors engage in self-advocacy to avoid role confusion and burnout (Clemens et al., 2011). Put simply, students deserve school counselors who are fulfilling the duties they are trained to perform and are not experiencing burnout, as we understand effective school counseling advocacy can reduce the impact of discrimination, poverty, and injustice (McMahan et al., 2010).

Implications of this research connect to currently practicing school counselors as well as counselor educators. Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar (2009) recommended advocacy continuing education or professional development. Practicing school counselors can engage in advocacy training, including advocacy for students, the profession, and self, to increase self-efficacy (Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Counselor education courses might include training in the area of self-advocacy. Training could include exercises to improve communication skills (Doherty, Landry, Pate, & Reid, 2016; Havlik et al., 2019), use of visual aids such as videos of how to self-advocate and role-play (Walker & Test, 2011); and use of evaluative instruments such as the NGSE (Chen et al., 2001) or SCSAQ (Clemens et al., 2011) to foster self-awareness of student self-advocacy positions. Counselor educators could potentially utilize an intervention as presented in Walker and Test's (2011) study in which counselors-in-training learning advocacy techniques coupled tasks to implement the technique within a specified timeframe. Students could carry these tasks out within their program - by advocating for what they need from a professor; or, at their practicum or

internship site - by requesting a set time to meet with the site supervisor to ensure supervision hours are fulfilled. School counselors are collaborative members of the educational team that advocates for systemic change in both the school and community (ASCA, 2016, 2019).

Havlik et al. (2019) explored counselor educators' experiences in school counselor preparation in professional advocacy engagement, suggesting additional research to gauge training that may promote school counselor advocacy confidence. The researchers also suggested additional assessment of self-efficacy to professionally advocate, or lack thereof, of graduating counselors-in-training (Havlik et al., 2019). Training within our courses could include how to effectively voice ideas and beliefs within such educational teams that include members who may or may not support those ideas and beliefs. Additionally, supervision of practicum and internship students could focus more on strengthening students' self-efficacy by addressing concerns and questions regarding advocacy issues faced within placements. Results revealed that counselor education training did not significantly impact school counselor self-efficacy in self-advocacy. The majority (77.6%) of respondents reported attending a CACREP institution. Future studies could seek to include or focus more on students and graduates of non-CAREP programs.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The small sample size ($N = 85$) could pose a threat to findings being extending to other studies or populations. The response rate was low for this study. Future studies can revise recruitment methods; to include a paper-pencil survey method, for example. Though it is suggested that perceived self-efficacy scales should tailor to the interested domain (Bandura, 2006, as cited in Kautzman-East, 2016), modification of the New General Self-Efficacy (NGSE) poses a limitation to the analysis. Future studies could utilize the original scale or another, such as the School Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005) to

gauge school counselor self-efficacy. Computing the NGSE into an interval measure to achieve the total score, as it is originally a Likert-type scale (ordinal), poses an additional limitation (Clemons et al., 2011). Furthermore, professional advocacy can be identified as the core of counselor professional identity (Toporek et al., 2009; Brat et al., 2016). Counselor educators and supervisors can incorporate overall advocacy in professional identity training (Brat et al., 2016). Future research could examine school counselors' professional identity in the assessment of self-efficacy of self-advocacy.

Conclusion

This study sought to better understand factors that contribute to school counselors' self-efficacy in self-advocating. The type of training received (i.e. self (as a school counselor), students, or the profession) had a statistically significant effect on school counselors' self-efficacy in self-advocating. Advocacy efforts are described as advocacy for the profession and the client (Myers & Sweeney, 2004; ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016, 2019). Effective ability to self-advocate can help school counselors create and facilitate comprehensive school counseling programs that promote student success. While training and research have focused on how to best serve the profession as a whole, which directly impacts service to the client or student, the focus should shift more to training school counselors on how to advocate for themselves.

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