PUBLIC ARENA ADVOCACY:

EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL COUNSELING LEADERS

by

JENNIFER CLABAUGH DIAZ

(Under the Direction of JOLIE DAIGLE)

ABSTRACT

School counselors are positioned as leaders to be effective advocates promoting access and equity for all students. Public arena advocacy requires collective action and collaboration with stakeholders and elected officials. Multiple barriers exist for school counselors who advocate for students at a systemic level. Additionally, there is a lack of research available to inform school counselors about these practices.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the essences of the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the public arena level. The research question guiding this study was, "What are the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level?" Using phenomenological methods guided by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2001), 12 school counseling leaders with three or more years of work experience engaging in advocacy activities at the legislative/public arena level participated in the study. Using a semi-structured recorded interview, the school counseling leaders shared their lived experiences of advocating in the legislative/public arena level. Bandura's (1994) social

learning and self-efficacy theory and Dollarhide's (2003) model of school counselor

leadership were both used to frame this study.  Thematic analysis identified the following

themes: understanding the legislative learning curve, building confidence, balancing

roles, building and maintaining relationships, working collectively, dealing with

resistance, and using your voice for change.  This study contributes to the body of school

counseling leadership and advocacy research.  The findings in this study provided insight

regarding the meaning and experience of legislative/public arena advocacy for school

counseling leaders.

INDEX WORDS:    Public arena advocacy, advocacy, school counselor, school

counseling, school counseling leadership, legislative, social justice

advocacy, phenomenology

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Benjamin, Zachary, Jules, and Bryan.  You've sacrificed the most while supporting me over the last four and a half years.  I can only hope that I have been able to role model for you that hard things can be done without giving up who you are.  Life is tough, but so are you.

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**CHAPTER 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

School counselors are masters-level educators who provide critical services for all

K-12 students. (Carey & Martin, 2017; Gysbers, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2011).

Through the support of legislation aimed at increasing the quality of student education,

the profession of school counseling has grown to be a recognized and integral part of a

student's education (ASCA, 2019). However, increasingly, school counselors are

required to take on duties that are not counseling-related and work with extraordinary

caseloads despite literature that links comprehensive counseling programs and effective

school counselors to higher achievement scores (Carey & Martin, 2015; Hatch & Chen-

Hayes, 2008; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012; Wilkerson, Perusse & Hughes, 2013).

Most school counselors enter the counseling field to help students, yet are constrained by

these extra duties and can appear ineffective because they are required to serve well over

the nationally recommended caseload of one school counselor per every 250 students

(ASCA, 2020).

Due to the fact that each state and school district may have different sources and

types of educational decision makers (e.g. school board members, city council members,

legislators), school counselors must have the ability to successfully advocate for their

students with stakeholders within their school buildings as well as on a systemic level

with education board members, city council members, and even state or national

legislators. However, many school counselors do not feel prepared to advocate at a

legislative/public arena level or have not developed the skills to do so (Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013). Most school counselors are not aware of what this experience is like and are intimidated by this lack of understanding (Havlik, Malott, Yee, DeRosato, & Crawford, 2019). There is a lack of clarity regarding the experience of advocating successfully at this level (Chibbaro, 2006).

Missing from the literature are the voices and stories of the school counselors who have actively engaged in advocacy activities for their profession. This dissertation study is unique because it contributes to the literature regarding the experiences of school counselors who advocate for the profession at the legislative/public arena level. To understand what it means to be an advocate, the experiences of school counselors who have done this work must be explored. The following sections in this chapter include a statement of the problem, purpose, significance, brief overview, theoretical framework, and limitations of the study.

## Background/Statement of the Problem

Though it looked very different than it does now, the profession of school counseling dates back to the early 1900s when career guidance was being used to influence students' career choices and ultimately improve the economic development of the United States (Carey & Martin, 2017; Herr, 2000; Gysbers, 2001). Over time and with the passage of several critical pieces of national legislation like the National Education Defense Act (NEDA) in 1957, the Vocational Education Act in 1963, the Community Mental Health Services Act in 1963, and eventually, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 through the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, school counseling services have grown to be supported and funded

through state and federal government (Gysbers & Henderson, 2011; Sweeney, 2012; Zunker, 2016). Legislators and policy makers need to hear from school counselors with information that can inform them about what legislation or policies need to be written in order to support students through school counseling services (Rallis & Carey, 2017; Stevenson & Edvalson, 2017).

School counselors are positioned in their school buildings as leaders who define, manage, deliver, and assess comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019). Leadership and advocacy are cornerstones of school counseling services, along with systemic change and collaboration (ASCA, 2003, 2012, 2019; Mullen, Newhart, Haskins, Shapiro, & Cassel, 2019), however, direction on developing these skills lacks clarity (Young & Bryan, 2018). School counselors who do not have well developed leadership skills will have a challenging time fully engaging in advocacy work and creating systemic changes for their students (Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2018).

Effective advocacy for school counseling communicates to stakeholders how students are different as a result of the work of school counselors (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). Advocacy efforts from school counselors are expected at multiple levels (Crook, Stenger, & Gesselman, 2015; Hippolito & Delgado, 2007) in order to remove external and institutional barriers to student well-being and growth (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). This may mean advocating for a student to a teacher or a principal or advocating for school counseling services at the legislative level to make systemic changes for all students. Raising advocacy efforts to a systemic level requires school counselors to connect their activities in their schools to legislation and public policy (Dillman-Taylor, 2011; Lewis, Toporek, & Ratts, 2010). Research has claimed that social justice advocacy

work is a moral and ethical imperative (Lee, 2007; Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013) and that school counselors are ideal for that role because of the level of leadership and collaboration required to build and maintain a comprehensive program that promotes access and equity for the needs of all students (Dahir & Stone, 2009, House & Hayes, 2002). School counselors collect and disaggregate school-wide qualitative and quantitative data regarding student achievement and school climate, collaborate with almost every other staff person in a school building, consult with parents on a regular basis, and coordinate partnerships with community agencies (American School Counselor Association, 2019). This knowledge and these relationships position school counselors to be powerful advocates for systemic change.

The American Counseling Association released the Advocacy Competencies in 2003 lending structure to advocacy activities among counselors (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). The domains within the competencies help counselors see themselves as working on behalf of or working with their client/s from the client/student level, to the school community level, and finally to the public arena (Crook et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). At the systems and public arena advocacy level, a counselor may be working or communicating directly with policy makers or legislators that have the capability of making systemic changes in a formal way through policy or legislation (Lewis, Ratts, Paladino, & Toporek, 2011). These competencies were updated by the ACA in 2018 and reflected expansion of skills necessary to be successful in advocacy efforts (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Counselors are encouraged to engage in legislative advocacy (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009; Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013), yet specific actions and ways to develop these advocacy competencies and skills

are not clear and lacking in the literature (Chibbaro, 2006; Storlie, Hongryun, Fink, & Fowler, 2019).

The imperative of social justice is considered the 'fifth wave' in the counseling field (Lee, 2012; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009; Ratts, 2009) implying that counselors will seek distributive justice for all clients (Gonzalez, Fickling, Ong, Gray, & Waalkes, 2018). School counselors are asked to answer this mandate by advocating for increased access and quality of services for marginalized students (Hippolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Both the ACA and the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) have included social justice ideals in their competencies and ethical standards (Griffin & Steen, 2010; ASCA, 2016) asking counselors to create systemic change as a professional imperative (Smith et al., 2009). However, the literature does not offer support for school counselors who want to engage in advocacy work at this level with constructive information about what advocacy work entails.

Multiple organizations exist that serve school counselors and aim to elevate the profession of school counseling. The ACA and the ASCA both exist to support counselors and work towards greater achievements and recognition for the profession. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is the accrediting body that determines the educational requirements for preservice institutions training counselors (CACREP, 2009). The Education Trust is a national non-profit organization aimed at reforming public education in the U.S. and established the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (Martin, 2002). College Board (2010) is a college readiness non-profit organization that created the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA). Collectively, these

organizations make an impact advocating for school counseling, but lack the voices of school counselors who are working with students.

School counselors have extremely full schedules and caseloads. Therefore, they may lack the time and energy it takes to become knowledgeable and engage in advocacy work in a tumultuous and intimidating political arena (McMahan, Singh, Urbano, & Haston, 2010). Additionally, time for systems level advocacy activities are not included in the ASCA recommendations for comprehensive school counseling programs. This is compounded by the fact that there is very little policy research on school-based counseling (Sink & Carey, 2018) and social justice advocacy behaviors of school counselors (Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011).

Though it is seen as the responsibility of pre-service educators to train school counselors in social justice and advocacy skills (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Hill, Harrawood, Vereen & Doughty, 2012), most educators do not have enough experience in this work to be able to teach an advocacy course (Lee et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is limited research that can support pre-service educators in training school counselors in advocacy skills (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Havlik et al., 2019).

School counselors face barriers when it comes to advocating on a public arena level and are not equipped with enough supporting literature, but it is critical that more become engaged in professional advocacy in order to benefit students. More detailed discussion of these issues can be found in chapter two.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the essence of the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for the profession

of school counseling at the legislative/public arena level. School counselors consistently are told that advocacy is important for student success, but they are not given the tools needed to understand what is required of them. The focus of this research was to create a description of the experiences of school counselors who have engaged in legislative/public arena level advocacy work through which other school counselors can be trained and informed. Therefore, the research question that guided this study was, "What are the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level?"

## Significance of the Study

The results of this study provided insight into a better understanding of the school counselor experience of advocating at the legislative/public arena level. School counselors will recognize and understand the importance of advocacy at the legislative/public arena level and therefore will increase their engagement and leadership in advocacy. School counselors will also understand the link between leadership development and increasing advocacy competencies. Lawmakers will benefit from more effective relationships with school counseling advocates. Additionally, counselor educators will be better able to train pre-service school counselors for advocacy work on a systemic level. These insights will eventually lead to greater K-12 student achievement through increased advocacy for school counseling services in the public arena.

With this study, the experience of school counseling leaders advocating at the legislative/public arena level is better understood. A qualitative phenomenological study was used to gain insight into the essence of the lived experience of school counseling leaders who have advocated at the legislative/public arena level.

**Brief Overview of the Study**

As the responses to the research question resulted in an explanation of the essence of the experiences of school counselor leaders who have experience advocating at the legislative/public arena level, a transcendental phenomenological method was utilized. Purposeful sampling was employed identifying school counselor leaders who have participated in legislative advocacy activities that are clearly delineated in chapter three. Further participants were identified through snowball sampling, building to a sample size that reaches saturation. A semi-structured interview protocol of open-ended questions were utilized with the participants allowing for the use of probes and clarifying questions (Merriam, 2009). Interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded by a three-person research team, consisting of two counseling doctoral students with experience in qualitative research and the researcher. Horizonalization was also utilized to ensure that statements carrying significant meaning were identified (Moustakas, 1994). The research team independently coded the first two transcripts and agreed upon the identified codes and themes allowing for triangulation between team members, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). This allowed me to build a code book that I then followed as I coded the rest of the transcripts, increasing inter-coder reliability (Patton, 2002).

Throughout this transcendental phenomenological study, I engaged in multiple efforts to decrease my personal bias from interfering with the research process. In my endeavor to discover the essence of my participants' experiences with the phenomenon of advocating at a legislative/public arena level, I utilized a reflexivity journal, prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, and provided thick and rich descriptions

honoring the voices of my participants (Merriam, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).  Additionally, I maintained an audit trail in order to bring more transparency to my research methods.

Participants were asked to provide their most recent resumes as an additional source of data that provided another opportunity for triangulation.  The resumes were examined looking for information and patterns in participants' education, years of experience, leadership and development activities, and contributions to the field of school counseling.  This offered corroborative and supportive evidence of the findings from the transcripts reducing the risk of chance associations and systemic biases (Creswell, 2014).  More details about the specific design of the study are provided in chapter three.

## Theoretical Framework

Bandura's (1994) theory of social cognitive learning and self-efficacy, as well as Dollarhide's (2003) model of school counselor leadership were used to conceptualize this study.  Those with higher self-efficacy often are more persistent in reaching goals despite setbacks and challenges because of their growth and belief in themselves and their knowledge (Bandura, 1994).  School counselor leaders maintain a high level of confidence and belief in their ability to continue developing their program into a more effective one towards consistently greater achievements (Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015).  A deeper explanation of the theoretical framework of this study is provided in chapter two.

## Limitations

In this study, there were several limitations that needed to be considered.  As my participant pool represented multiple states, advocacy may look different for each participant because of their state's political nature.  Some states operate from a local

control stance where each individual district is able to make independent decisions. Some states utilize unions that organize professionals and often speak representing the whole of their constituents. These types of considerations may have affected their responses, and nuances in advocacy activities may exist. Additionally, as participants were spread across the country, I was limited to virtual meetings. As technology can interfere with reading body language and picking up on emotional cues during a conversation, there were instances when fostering a true authentic conversation with participants may have been limited. Another limitation may have existed based on my participant selection criteria. I only interviewed school counselors who have three or more years of certified experience, thus I may have missed out on the experiences of participants that began successfully advocating earlier on in their career or even training.

## Definitions of Terms

### School Counselor

A school counselor is a masters level certified/licensed educator that helps all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career development through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program which includes activities and interventions such as, but not limited to: individual and group counseling, classroom curriculum lessons, academic advising, parent and teacher consultation, and school-wide programming in order to prepare students for post-secondary success (ASCA, 2020).

### Legislator

A legislator is a person in an elected position that writes or passes laws. This could be at the state or national level.

**Advocacy**

Advocacy in counseling is a two pronged concept, dealing with advocating for the client and advocating for the profession (Chang, Barrio-Minton, Dixon, Myers, & Sweeney, 2012). In either case, advocacy is speaking up to address systemic barriers and issues facing students, clients, client groups or whole populations (Toporek & Daniels, 2018).

**Legislative/public arena level advocacy**

In the public arena level of advocacy, counselors can engage in collective action where they collaborate with groups to address systemic issues through changing public perception or policies or in social/political advocacy where they may work to raise awareness of or speak on behalf of an issue to stakeholders in much larger arenas (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). This may be with school board members, local officials, and/or with elected legislators.

**American School Counselors Association**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is an organization that supports school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, career and social/emotional development as they prepare for post-secondary success. ASCA supports school counselors through providing professional development, publications and other resources, research, and advocacy for the profession (ASCA, 2020).

**American Counseling Association**

The American Counseling Association is a not-for-profit, professional and educational organization founded in 1952, that is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession (ACA, 2020)

**Comprehensive School Counseling Programs (CSCPs)**

CSCPs address and improve a range of student learning and behavior outcomes (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012) and are comprehensive in scope, informed by data, preventive in design, developmental in nature, and delivered to all students in a systematic way by a certified/licensed masters level school counselor (ASCA, 2017).

<p style="text-align:center"><strong>Chapter Summary</strong></p>

This chapter presented preliminary information regarding the focus of this qualitative research study.  Pertinent background information related to advocacy mandates, advocacy competencies, school counselor leadership development, and barriers to advocacy were presented.  The chosen methodology for the study was introduced as well as the significance of the study.  The subsequent chapter will summarize literature related to school counseling advocacy at the legislative/public arena level and difficulties school counselors experience related to advocacy work. Additionally, the methodology chosen for this study will be outlined in detail in chapter three.

**CHAPTER 2**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presents a review of relevant literature related to advocacy work on a legislative or public arena level for school counselors. An overview of legislation affecting the development of school counseling is provided followed by relevant research on counselor leadership development, systems advocacy within the field, and advocacy efforts of professional organizations. Social justice, explaining the moral imperative for school counselors to engage in systems level advocacy is discussed, as well as the barriers practicing school counselors face when engaging in advocacy such as time constraints, limited supporting research, and fear of risking job loss. Through this study, the researcher aimed to describe the experiences of school counseling leaders in the field that have actively engaged in systems and public arena level advocacy work. The research question guiding this study is, "What are the experiences of school counselor leaders who advocate the profession at the legislative/public arena level?" Specifically, the intent of this phenomenological study was to understand and explore the experience of school counselor leaders who advocate successfully at the legislative and public arena level and better prepare pre-service counselor trainees and counselor practitioners in advocacy practices.

**Legislation Affecting School Counseling**

**Early 1900s**. Throughout history, the practice of school counseling has been shaped by legislation and public policy. In the early 1900s, economic development and

security of the nation was a priority (Carey & Martin, 2017; Gysbers, 2001; Herr, 2000).

Frank Parsons is considered the founder of career guidance/counseling because of his

trait-factor theory of occupational decision making that was published post-humously in

*Choosing a Vocation* in 1909, which helped to solidify national interest in career

guidance (Zunker, 2016). In 1913, the National Career Development Association was

founded and gained the support of the U.S. government for work in helping to employ

Americans (Zunker, 2016). Due to the focus on vocational guidance, in 1938, the

Vocational Division of the U.S. Office of Education established the Occupational

Information and Guidance Service allowing federal monies to be sent to state offices in

order to provide assistance in vocational, personal and educational guidance (Gysbers &

Henderson, 2011).

**Mid to Late 1900's**. After the Soviet Union launched a space capsule in 1957,

the National Education and Defense Act (NEDA) was passed and provided career

guidance for students toward science and engineering related fields to secure the United

States' position as a global leader (Sweeney, 2012; Zunker, 2016). Through the NEDA,

school principals were then instructed to identify teacher leaders in their buildings that

would be ideal for this work to train as guidance counselors in schools across the country

(Gysbers & Henderson, 2011). With the Vocational Education Act of 1963, federal funds

were designated for the first time to maintenance of state program supervision, salaries to

counselor trainers, research in the field of vocational guidance, and salaries of local

guidance supervisors and counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2011).

**Mental Health and Pupil Services**. As social reform continued in our nation, a

shift towards mental health services started to change the trajectory of counseling in

general.  With the passage of the Community Mental Health Services Act in 1963, community mental health centers were established around the country which began an increased awareness of mental health issues in general (Sweeney, 2012).  Even in the field of education, by the mid to late 1960's, mental health counseling and developmental guidance for students were seen as the main priority for pupil personnel services and guidance programs (Gysbers & Henderson, 2011).  Passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) in 1965 allowed for funding towards school guidance and counseling programs through subsequent amendments (Gysbers & Henderson, 2011).  Through ESSA's most recent reauthorization through the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, school counseling services are specifically mentioned as part of specialized instructional support and pupil services that help to support high levels of accountability and standards for educating all students (Brown, Lenares-Solomon & Deaner, 2019).

In order to improve the practice and profession of school counseling and considering that state and federal legislation directly affects the job of the school counselor, counselors must be informed as to how to contribute to the development of policy and legislation.  Additionally, legislators and policy makers need a wide range of information about school counseling in order to know how to promote it and what legislation or actions will create the largest benefits for students (Rallis & Carey, 2017; Stevenson & Edvalson, 2017).  However, research regarding policies affecting school counseling are limited (Rallis & Carey, 2017).  Considering a major function of school counselors is to serve as advocates for their students, abundant literature exists regarding advocating for students (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010).  However, there is a gap in the literature regarding practices school counselors can utilize in legislative

advocacy for student issues or for the profession (Cigrand, Havlik, Malott, & Jones, 2015), thus school counselors are often uncertain and intimidated serving in this role.

**School Counselor Leadership Identity**

In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) released the first edition of the ASCA National Model in order to move school counseling services from reactive to preventative programming for every student, standardize school counseling programming in the U.S., and cement school counseling as an integral aspect of student success (ASCA, 2019).  This was a new paradigm for school counselors requiring them to frame their comprehensive counseling program around the four quadrants of foundation (e.g. mission and vision statements), management (e.g. calendars, management agreements), delivery (e.g. individual counseling, classroom lessons, small group counseling), and accountability (e.g. collecting and disaggregating data for stakeholders).  In the latest edition, these four quadrants have been renamed to define, manage, deliver, and asses, but remain basically the same (ASCA, 2019).  School counselors serving students through these four quadrants of program management position themselves as leaders in their buildings and better enable themselves to help every student in their building.

Leadership for school counselors is integral to the roles of advocacy, systemic change, and collaboration as these roles support the framework and implementation of ASCA's national model of comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2003, 2012, 2019; Mullen, Newhart, Haskins, Shapiro, & Cassel, 2019), yet there is a lack of clarity regarding what comprises school counselor leadership as it is an ongoing and evolving process (Young & Bryan, 2018).  School counselors have been called upon to

create systemic change and enhance the educational environment by advocating on behalf of students, thus the call for leadership skills is implicit (ASCA, 2012; Mullen, Newhart, Haskins, Shapiro & Cassel, 2019). McMahon, Mason, and Paisley (2009) described leadership as 'the foundation for the transformed school counselor' (p.117) and stated that it is a prerequisite to the other essential skills required to run a comprehensive counseling program.

As counselors enter into the workforce and gain experience, they undergo many transitions. Moss, Gibson, and Dollarhide (2014) outlined a grounded theory of transformational tasks of counselors as they work to integrate the personal and professional self. They highlighted the three tasks of a counselor moving from idealism to realism, through burnout to rejuvenation, and finally from compartmentalization to congruency when being a counselor becomes a core part of who they are as a person. Through this process, a counselor is gaining experience and wisdom regarding their practice as a professional and building skills to use as they become a leader in the field and gain courage in their voice.

**Four Framework Model**. Dollarhide (2003) built a model of school counselor leadership based on Bolman and Deal's (1997, 2008) Four Framework Approach to organizational leadership in support of the idea that school counseling is no longer an ancillary service, but an essential aspect of student education. Within this framework, there are four frames or lenses within which leadership decisions and activities occur: structural, involving building sustainable organizations; human resource, dealing with empowerment and inspiration of others; political, referring to interpersonal and organizational influence; and symbolic, which has to do with sharing the meaning of

change within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 1997 & 2008). Dollarhide (2003)

translated this to a school counselor leader's ability to structure and develop a

comprehensive counseling program, inspire other educators and stakeholders, question

and access formal and informal power structures or resources (e.g. administrative

leadership, local board of education, legislators, etc.), and communicate a strong vision,

purpose and meaning regarding school counseling programming with all stakeholders

(Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015).

**Dimensional Themes of School Counselor Leadership**. Young & Bryan (2018)

developed the School Counselor Leadership Survey that identified five key dimensions

exemplifying school counselor leadership practices. These dimensions were: (a)

interpersonal influence describing the buy-in and perceptions others have of leaders

resulting from their communication styles, (b) resourceful problem solving which has to

do with the ability to identify solutions to programmatic obstacles and promote student

achievement, (c) systemic collaboration that addresses how a school counselor works

with other stakeholders to increase systemic outcomes for all students, (d) social justice

advocacy which describes how a school counselor goes about challenging the status quo

ensuring equitable services for all students, and (e) professional efficacy which highlights

the confidence and belief a school counselor has in their ability to continuously move

their program toward greater achievements (Young et al., 2015; Young & Bryan, 2018).

After surveying over 1,300 ASCA member school counselors with the School

Counselor Leadership Survey, using exploratory factor analysis, Young et al. (2015)

identified five themes regarding school counselor perception, articulating and validating a

framework that offers a deeper comprehension of what school counselors value in

leaders. These themes were identified as: leadership attributes, showing a willingness and ability to lead improvement through a solid vision for the program; relationship attributes, highlighting the ability to develop healthy reciprocal relationships with others; communication and collaboration, which centralizes communication skills; exemplary program design, focusing on creating and implementing a comprehensive program; and advocacy, dealing with equity, access, inclusion and outreach for all students. These themes together highlight the fact that leaders must think systematically to determine strong visions and accomplish lofty goals (Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013) as they develop these attributes.

**Leader identity development and self-efficacy**. Interested in the evolution of leadership identity development across the lifespan, Gibson, Dollarhide, Moss, Aras, and Mitchell (2018) conducted a survey of previous presidents of the American Counseling Association (ACA) that generated three interactional themes with reciprocal effects on one another. As a counselor matures in their leadership skills, they receive: (1) influence, motivation, and support to lead from other mentors or inspirational leaders; (2) reinforcing experiences that encourage continued involvement in leadership activities; and (3) leadership skills developed over time that increase their ability to share a vision and take risks while maintaining their own wellness (Gibson et al., 2018). The participants shared that their dedication to servant leadership was cultivated through inspiration prior to and after formal training through a sense of responsibility that turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy connected to a sense of higher purpose and social justice leadership. This mirrors other professional identity development models that highlight a

dependence on guidance from inspirational role models and the urge to find meaning about one's self through relating with others (Gibson, Dollarhide, Leach, & Moss, 2015).

This leadership identity development description is supported by Bandura's (1994) theory of social cognitive learning and self-efficacy that states creating a strong sense of efficacy requires mastery experiences, vicarious experiences created by role models, social persuasion convincing one of other's beliefs in their abilities, and reducing stress reactions from misinterpretations of physical states during critical moments.  Higher self-efficacy is often associated with a persistence to reach goals despite challenges and setbacks (Bandura, 1994).  Leadership self-efficacy has been described as "a person's judgement that he or she can successfully exert leadership by setting a direction for the work group, building a relationship with followers in order to gain their commitment to change goals, and working with them to overcome obstacles to change" (Paglis & Green, 2002, p. 217).  Quite often, self-efficacy is reached through personal and vicarious accomplishment (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010), therefore highly efficacious school counselors, who are often burdened with non-counseling duties, will simply do more, setting goals for themselves that show higher levels of commitment, motivation, resilience and perseverance (Ernst, Bardhoshi, & Lanthier, 2017; Mullen et al., 2019).

Young and Miller-Kneale (2013) provided a list of abilities or practices that school counselor leaders should embrace in order to be effective and include:

- use multiple strategies and resources to solve problems (e.g., professional literature and organizations, collegial relationships, compromise, collaboration);
- build partnerships and engage all stakeholders (e.g., parents, local leaders, boards of education, legislators);

- navigate through the politics of systems (e.g., school systems, educational systems, governmental jurisdictions, etc.);

- advocate for equitable services for marginalized and all students with a courageous stance;

- excel in the use of appropriate accountability strategies to challenge status quo (e.g. accessing, disaggregating, and sharing applicable student data);

- persuade colleagues and build consensus;

- identity and accomplish goals with confidence;

- exceed expectations when accomplishing tasks;

- accept the responsibility to lead (e.g. serving on school and counseling organization leadership teams); and

- acquire a leadership mindset. (Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013, p.30).

Building and improving upon all of these skillsets takes intentionality, but counselor leadership is more of a complex art form than a mechanical process (Young & Dollarhide, 2017). Betters-Bubon and Schultz (2018) asserted that school counselors will not be able to fully engage in advocacy work and create systemic change without having well developed leadership skills.

**School Counseling Advocacy**

ASCA's preamble to the Ethical Standards for School Counselors states that, "School counselors are advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create systemic change by providing equitable educational access and success by connecting their school counseling programs to the district's mission and improvement plans" (ASCA, 2016, p.1). Effective advocacy for school counseling will provide stakeholders

an answer to the question, "How are students different as a result of what school counselors do?" (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). The profession of school counseling has endured many shifts and changing trajectories including vocational guidance, assessment and accountability, engaging classroom curriculum lessons, college and career readiness, mental health, diversity, and social justice (Gysbers & Henderson, 2011; McMahon et al., 2009). These shifts make the role of school counselors highly nuanced with variations in the delivery of services among practitioners and schools working to meet their students' needs (Goodman-Scott, Sink, Cholewa, & Burgess, 2018). The research suggests that school counselors must further stretch their abilities beyond traditional interventions for individual students. The National Center for the Transformation of School Counseling (NCTSC) stated that, "The trained school counselor must be an assertive advocate creating opportunities for all students to pursue dreams of high aspirations" (EdTrust, 2009).

Advocacy Mandates. Among school counselors, advocacy is seen as one of the most important characteristics of school counselor leaders (Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015) and mandates are set for school counselors to advocate on a broader, macro scale (Crook, Stenger, & Gesselman, 2015; Hippolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; EdTrust, 2011). Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar (2009) described advocacy as actions counselors take in order to remove external and institutional barriers to their clients' well-being with two overarching goals of increasing a sense of personal power among clients and fostering environmental changes to benefit clients' well-being. However, there is little in the literature regarding how school counselors advocate on a social/political or public arena level to make these environmental or systemic changes. Despite this, many

authors have made the point that school counselors need to be strategic in connecting what they are doing in their buildings to efforts that involve advocacy for legislative or public policy changes (Dillman-Taylor, 2011; Lewis, Toporek, & Ratts, 2010).

Dahir and Stone (2009) compiled action research from school counseling practitioners showing effectiveness of their programming stating that, "school counselors are ideally situated in schools to serve as social justice advocates to eliminate the achievement gap and to focus their efforts on ensuring success for every underserved and underrepresented student" (p.12). Researchers have claimed that social justice advocacy work is a moral and ethical responsibility calling counselors to serve as change agents in the public arena of advocacy in order to impact legislation and public policy creating positive structural changes (Lee, 2007; Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013). In the ASCA book *School Counselor Leadership* (Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013), the authors stated that counselors should be engaged in the political process in order to advocate for appropriate school counselor to student ratios, reduce non-school counseling duties, and seek opportunities for leadership. Often, the terms school counselor and advocate can be used synonymously (Borders, 2002), making it difficult to define the role of the school counselor as this makes advocacy an umbrella term for everything school counselors do (Clemens, Shipp, & Kimbel, 2011). Davis (2005) stated, "an important guideline is to honor your commitment to being a professional school counselor and be ready to advocate for the programs and practices that you know will sustain the students and the profession" (p.274).

**Career Calling**. School counselors often express that it is important to engage in social justice work/action and that advocacy is a natural outgrowth of what counselors do

as empathic individuals (Lewis, Ratts, Paladino, and Toporek (2011). School counselors feel a true calling to the field and the work within. This 'calling' is a good predictor of social justice advocacy work (Wheelus, 2017). Considering the determination it takes to deal with resistance, sacrifice personal time and energy, and risk professional standing while attempting to make systemic changes, this sense of 'calling' among school counselors is evident (Lee et al., 2013). Lewis et al. (2011) described advocacy as not an add-on but a "natural outgrowth of the counselor's empathy and experience" (p.9). School counselors are able to view their students through a contextual lens, and with the use of data, can use advocacy to remove barriers and address systemic issues for subgroups or their entire student population (Lewis et al., 2011). In addition, political advocacy expresses a higher engagement with the profession and is a professional competency that solidifies the development of a comprehensive school counseling program (Woo & Henfied, 2015).

  **Advocacy Competencies**. ACA's (2005) Code of Ethics states "when appropriate, counselors advocate at individual, group, institutional, and societal levels to examine the potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or growth and development of clients" (A.6.a.). ACA's Advocacy Competencies were first released and endorsed by the governing council in 2003 (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003), giving counselors structure to advocacy activities important to our profession (Crook et al., 2015). According to the ACA Code of Ethics, advocacy is defined as the "promotion of the well-being of individuals and groups, and the counseling profession within systems and organizations. Advocacy seeks to remove barriers and obstacles that inhibit access, growth, and development" (2005, A.6.A). These competencies are organized into six

different domains delineated between acting with or acting on behalf of clients using varying levels of intervention moving from client/student, to school/community, and finally to public arena (Crook et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Snow, 2010).

When acting in partnership with a client or clients, the counselor moves from working to empower the client/s through individual interventions with the client, to community collaboration where a counselor might work with a group describing barriers that a community is facing, and finally to working with the client/s to disseminate information in the public arena regarding large scale, systemic issues causing harm (Lewis et al., 2011). When acting on behalf of a client or clients, the counselor moves from advocating specifically for a client/student, to systems advocacy where a counselor may advocate for a community facing specific barriers, and finally to social/political advocacy where a counselor is communicating directly with policy makers and legislators advocating or lobbying for systemic changes (Lewis, et al., 2011).

The ACA's advocacy competencies were recently updated in 2018 reflecting expansion and clarification of the original 2003 competencies. In the social/political section of the advocacy model, counselors are utilizing up to ten skills in order to address systemic issues on behalf of client groups or communities (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). These skills are: (1) identify the communities affected by an issue and whether or not they are active in advocacy, (2) gain an understanding of the communities views and experiences, (3) distinguish problems that can best be solved through the counselor's expertise where the community may be lacking resources, (4) identify ways that the community can contribute to the effort, (5) identify and collaborate with other

professionals and allies who may be interested or already engaged in advocacy work, (6) identify appropriate mechanisms for addressing the issues while also distinguishing the role of public awareness, legislative, policy and judicial action, (7) understand the counselor's own cultural identity and positionality related to power, privilege, and oppression and the ramifications surrounding these, (8) support existing alliances, (9) prepare convincing data and rationales for public awareness campaigns or to lobby legislators and policy makers, and (10) maintain open dialogue with communities and clients to ensure that the social/political advocacy remains consistent with original goals (p.10). It is important that school counselors understand how to blend and balance advocacy skills with the everyday demands of the role in order to fulfill responsibilities while effectively creating systemic changes that will benefit their students.

Young and Miller-Kneale (2013) encouraged school counselors to engage in the political process by lobbying at the state and national level in order to advocate for appropriate school counselor to student ratios, reduce non-school counseling duties, and increase opportunities for leadership in order to reduce barriers for all students. Due to the fact that the goal of counseling is aimed toward positive change, Lopez-Baez and Paylo (2009) contend that counselors are the right professionals for systemic level advocacy because counseling itself is political in nature. However, some counselors might be hesitant to engage in political advocacy because specific actions and competencies required to advocate successfully at that level are still broad and unclear (Chibbaro, 2006).

**School Counselor Advocacy in the Literature**.  Professionals often turn to scholarly works to increase their knowledge or skill set in certain areas. However, in a study on advocacy competencies found in counseling literature from 2004-2016, 6,945 articles were identified from 23 counseling journals, yet only 280 of these articles (4.03%) contained research regarding the advocacy competencies (Storlie, Woo, Fink, & Fowler, 2019).  Only one of the 23 counseling journals were specific to school counseling, *Professional School Counseling*.  As a result of these low numbers, Storlie et al. encouraged practitioners and researchers to contribute to the field through empirical research regarding development of these competencies and what it actually means to be an advocate.  These numbers indicate the challenges of practicing school counselors to find scholarly literature that informs effective advocacy practices, develops resources, and increases engagement in advocacy.

**Advocacy Dispositions**.  Trusty and Brown (2005) delineated school counselor advocacy competencies in three separate categories of dispositions, knowledge and skills. Dispositions describe school counselors' personal qualities that can be developed but are somewhat inherent.  The dispositions include: being willing to take risks for students; joining parents in advocacy efforts; working to eliminate inequities and barriers for all people; and placing a high value on ethics.  Knowledge includes knowledge of available resources, parameters and legalities, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systemic change.  Skills include communication, collaboration, problem assessment, problem solving, organization, and self-care.  These dispositions highlight the knowledge, internal drive, and commitment of school counselors for their work, their

students and the profession. This knowledge, drive, and committment must be carried over into advocacy efforts for their students at a systemic/public arena level.

Beck and Lane (2019) conducted a study with 14 ASCA School Counselor of the Year finalists and generated five themes from a focus group regarding their perspectives on advocacy skills in their roles as school counselors which also correspond to the dispositions identified by Trusty and Brown (2005). Themes identified were that (a) advocacy is an ongoing process, (b) counselors should stand up and be the expert, (c) building a counselor-principal partnership is critical, (d) constructing equitable, individual and systemic change is imperative, and (e) investing and giving back to the profession. These counselors shared changes in their advocacy behaviors prior to and after their recognition, their plans moving forward and their wishes to leave a legacy in order to repay the profession for their own recognition, thus confirming the passion school counselors have for their job. However, even though this article summarized the experiences of highly recognized school counselors in the field, most of the study highlighted important advocacy work within the counselors' buildings and there was little mention of legislative or systems advocacy work. These counselors, with the dispositions and knowledge to create systemic change did not discuss systems level advocacy, pointing to the difficulties or hesitation school counselors have with advocating in the public arena because of inherent barriers.

**Advocating for the Profession**. Researchers are encouraged to conduct empirical research on advocacy competencies with professional counselors, to determine what it means to be an advocate and how advocacy competencies are related to counselors' professional development, identity, and their overall effectiveness (Storlie et

al., 2019). Advocating for the profession is equally as important as advocating for clients. In fact, some consider promoting a positive image of counseling and informing stakeholders about the services counselors provide prerequisites to helping others (Dillman-Taylor, 2011). Hof, Dinsmore, Barber, Suhr, and Scofield (2009) summarized four areas of professional advocacy intervention as: promoting professional identity, enhancing the public's image of counseling, developing inter-professional and intra-professional collaboration, and promoting legislative policy initiatives. Cigrand et al. (2015) defined school counselor professional advocacy as "school counselors' efforts to promote awareness and support for their professional role" (p.10) by communicating to stakeholders at the local school, community/state and larger society levels, the training and defined responsibilities of school counselors. School counselors must build positive relationships with critical stakeholders and work closely with them to communicate what is needed in order for legislators to understand why school counseling is important and how to help students through this profession.

Members of Chi Sigma Iota (CSI), an international counseling honor society, delineated six advocacy themes, offering a foundation for efforts to promote the profession (Chang, Barrio-Minton, Dixon, & Myers, 2012). These themes were: (a) counselor education, (b) intrapersonal relations, (c) marketplace recognition, (d) intra-professional issues, (e) research, and (f) prevention/wellness (Chi Sigma Iota, 2011). All of these themes center around establishing a firm professional identity among all counseling fields and reaching out to others to communicate that the goal of counseling is to promote prevention and wellness for all throughout the lifespan (Chang et al., 2012). Despite multiple calls to the field for work in these areas, counselors still have to work

hard educating others about what they do. Sweeney (2012) asked, "Could it be that too few leaders have a clear vision of the need for professional advocacy and that this contributes to a root cause for our lack of more progress?" (p.86). As school counselors work to advocate for our profession, it is important to understand the nuances and differences between advocating for counseling, and advocating specifically for school counseling, and ways each can support the other.

**Social Justice and School Counselors**

Social justice, as a theoretical perspective and counseling approach, has been referred to as a recurring wave and the 'fifth force' in the counseling field, following on the heels of the multicultural paradigm (Lee, 2012; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009; Ratts, 2009). This fifth wave in the counseling field reflects a shift in the helping professions from a Western and individual perspective to a more collective and contextual perspective where the external and societal oppressive pressures are seen as equally, if not more, important (Lewis et al., 2011). Social justice in counseling implies that professional counselors will seek distributive justice for all through combatting all forms of discrimination and oppressive forces in society because it is inherent throughout all aspects of the work that we do, in our ethical codes, and even in our standards for accreditation (Gonzalez, Fickling, Ong, Gray, & Waalkes, 2018; Lee, 2012). Hippolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) asked school counseling practitioners to redefine the paradigm of school counseling and answer the mandate of social justice by advocating for increased access and quality of social and educational services for marginalized students.

Despite suffering from conceptual pluralism and not having a succinct definition among the helping professions (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019), social justice encourages

counselors to look at the locus of client issues (interpersonal, familial, societal), the role

of the counselor and counselor's identity (counselor, advocate), and the types of

counseling skills needed to practice (counseling, advocacy) (Ratts, 2009; Smith et al.,

2009). Lee (2012) delineated three imperative aspects of social justice advocacy. These

were that counselors view helping from a systemic perspective, partner with

clients/groups who may not have the knowledge or skills to create this change alone, and

that counselors have an understanding of systems change principles and curate the skills

to act on them.

In an exploratory study, Dollarhide, Clevenger, Dogan, and Edwards (2016),

found four themes regarding the lived experiences of counselors with a social justice

identity. First, all of their participants credited early experiences that brought about

awareness of injustices and family values for the origins of their social justice awareness.

Second, participants also described that they noticed holistic changes in themselves

including their affect, behavior, thinking and chosen communities. A third theme

identified was one of adopting social justice as part of one's identity. The last theme was

a feedback loop, where participants described how increased self-reflection and self-

questioning increased the experience of the first three themes and thus strengthened the

social justice identity. These themes help to explain how school counselors function and

progress in their careers growing into leaders and advocates.

The term social justice actually has a long, yet somewhat confusing history. Pope

Pius XI was the first to use it in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, but there was

confusion in the Catholic religion about whether 'social justice' was to be considered a

virtue in individuals or doctrine of rights and justice (Novak & Adams, 2015). Novak

and Adams explained that this virtue actually involves both, in that its aim is improving

the common good of the larger society and has three constitutive practices: an art of

forming associations, willingness to lead, and cooperating with others. They elaborated

on the virtue of social justice stating that it teaches each generation to build connections,

to be inventive and proactive in solving problems and to focus on moving society

forward. All of these explanations parallel the four skills of leadership, collaboration,

advocacy and systemic change supporting the framework of the American School

Counselors Association (ASCA) national model (ASCA, 2012; ASCA, 2019).

**Social Justice Advocacy Strategies**. At the 2010 conference, the ACA held a

Multicultural-Social Justice Leadership Development Academy outlining action

strategies for counselors to embrace as they work towards a more socially just world:

develop a deeper understanding of cultural and intra-cultural differences, become

comfortable working on behalf of clients outside of the office, collaborate with

stakeholders in the community, and foster difficult discussions regarding existing

inequities that increase understanding in the community (Griffin & Steen, 2011). Griffin

and Steen (2011) outlined action strategies specific to school counselors as: develop

cultural competencies, support school counseling interventions with data, align oneself

with allies, find ways to speak up, educate and empower families, be politically engaged,

be bold (shun fear), be persistent, and conduct salient research that will inspire change.

Social justice advocacy components are woven throughout the ASCA Ethical

Standards for School Counselors (2016) including a specific section on working to

remove systemic barriers for underserved and at-risk populations emphasizing the role

school counselors play in student success. Multiple articles have been written that inform

school counselors on advocacy efforts in local school buildings for students and programming (Chibbaro, 2006), yet specific steps for school counselors to advocate on a legislative level continue to be unclear.

Through a grounded study of school counselor advocacy strategies, Singh et al. (2010) found seven overarching strategies used to create systemic change in schools. These were: (a) using political savvy, (b) raising consciousness, (c) initiating difficult dialogues, (d) building intentional relationships, (e) teaching self-advocacy to students, (f) marketing with data, and (g) teaching others about the role of school counselors. They defined 'political savvy' as knowing when and how to intervene when an injustice is identified and that raising consciousness was achieved through actualization of the rest of the strategies. Though one could see how all of these strategies could be utilized to advocate with district or state decision makers, their study focused specifically on school counselor advocacy within school systems and did not discuss how school counselors might leverage these skills at the legislative/public arena level. In order for more school counselors to become active in legislative advocacy, they need to understand what this process entails and how to implement these critical skills beyond their school buildings.

**Multicultural Social Justice Counseling Competencie**s. In 2015, the American Counseling Association endorsed the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC). These competencies are aspirational because counselors are seen as continuously furthering their development, understanding and commitment to this work (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). The MSJCC are based on a multi-level, socio-ecological model highlighting the interconnectedness of the individual and his or her environments and require counselors to develop a balance

between individual counseling and advocacy on small and large scales. Nassar-McMillan

(2014), one of the writers of the MSJCC, explained that there is an intersection between

multicultural counseling and social justice. Therefore, the center of the MSJCC starts

with ethically considering these two aspects when working with any client. The MSJCC

asks counselors to be aware of their own areas of privilege and marginalization as well as

the client's and to consider how these positions affect the counseling relationship and

growth of the client. The advocacy perspective of the MSJCC asks counselors to

consider advocacy on an individual level all the way to possibly working on a legislative

or global scale to make systemic changes (Nasser-McMillan, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016).

The Multicultural Social Justice Counseling Competencies implore counselors to

consider client issues from a contextual perspective, keeping in mind a client's

intersectionalities, any issues of power and privilege that may exist between the client

and the counselor in the counseling relationship, as well as oppressive forces from society

that the client may be facing (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). Ratts and Greenleaf (2018)

defined multicultural and social justice school counselor leadership as "leadership

interventions that consider the cultural values, beliefs and worldviews of culturally

diverse students and that address systemic inequities and barriers impacting students'

academic, social/emotional, and career development" (p.2). They stressed the importance

of symbolic and political leadership in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional,

community, public policy and international realms among school counselors in order to

address issues of power, privilege, and oppression that exist in education today.

**Challenging Work**. For some school counselors, this work is challenging. Many counselors chose this profession because they want to help individual students and may not be comfortable working on behalf of their students outside of their offices or school buildings (Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009). However, addressing oppressive public policy issues, international and global events are an indicator of multiculturally and social justice competent counselors (Ratts et al., 2016). Smith et al. (2009) affirmed that a driving force behind the social advocacy movement in counseling is stating that counselors are responsible for combating social illness at the societal level and simultaneously posed the question, "What right do counselors have to use discourse of social advocacy?" (p.486). Their answer was that despite the intimidating expectations, social justice advocacy is a professional imperative for the sake of our clients and society at large. Equally, it is the responsibility of school counselors to understand practice and policy paradigms in order to become educated on the problems within their schools' staff, students, and community, identify injustice at the individual and school wide level, and lead the way in reducing the achievement gaps. Lewis, et al. (2010) stated that counselors need to find a way to create a "seamless connection between what they do in the counseling office and what they do in the Capitol Building" (p. 241).

**Professional organizations**

Often, it is the professional organizations that drive advocacy priorities for practitioners in the public arena. Due to the fact that counselors are busy working within their offices and advocating for students at the client and school/system level, they tend to rely on these professional organizations to lobby and advocate for their profession at

the public arena level (Chibbaro, 2006; Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernandez, 2013).

However, all of these organizations call on individual counselors to increase advocacy

skills and activities to make their voices heard in the public arena in order to make a

greater impact on decision makers and legislators (Terrazas & Todd, 2014).

In 2011, the ACA developed the 20/20 Vision for the future of counseling which

encouraged all of the subdivisions of the organization to develop a unified vision and

definition of the profession of counseling (Kaplan et al., 2014; Reiner et al. 2013).

Recognizing that there is power in the definition of counseling (Lee et al., 2013),

counselors across multiple specialties would benefit from having a succinct definition

that could be used to clearly explain the role of counselors to external stakeholders

(Kaplan et al., 2014). However, in 2018, the ASCA became a completely independent

organization from the ACA and is no longer considered one of the ACA's subdivisions

(ACA, 2018). This split could contribute to further complications for school counselors

wishing to engage in political advocacy for their profession and school counseling

programs in general.

In 2005, the American School Counselor Association released the ASCA National

Model for school counseling programs (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). Included in the model

are mandates for counselors to develop a program in the areas of foundation, delivery,

management, and accountability. With implementation of this model, counselors should

be able to demonstrate, "How are students different as a result of what school counselors

do?" (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). The answer to this question is the perfect advocacy tool

for counselors to have when explaining to stakeholders why the position of school

counselor is essential to a child's education. Many states have followed suit with

adopting a comprehensive developmental guidance program or model and as of 2008, 44

states had an adopted model (Martin, Carey, & DeCoster, 2009), though currently only

33 states have comprehensive programs that are recognized by ASCA (ASCA, 2019).

However, Martin et al.'s study (2009) found that many of these models were poorly

implemented because of state mandates, local control issues and a lack of state evaluation

systems or simply lacked capacity to promote effective practice and policy. They

recommended practitioners use this information to drive professional advocacy, and

ASCA's (2016) Ethical Standards refer to the importance of school counselors

functioning as advocates and leaders as tenets of professional responsibility (para.2).

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs

(CACREP), formed in 1981, is the accrediting body that sets educational requirements

for higher education institutions training school counselors (Even & Robinson, 2013).

This is significant because graduates of CACREP accredited programs typically have

advantages in their initial licensing process and benefits throughout their careers (Mascari

& Webber, 2013; Reiner et al., 2013). CACREP's 2009 School Counseling and

Diversity standards mandate that school counselors be trained as advocates for

"community, environmental, and institutional opportunities that enhance – as well as

barriers that impeded – the academic, career, and personal/social development of

students" (CACREP, 2009, p.42). CACREP's goal is to ensure that counseling

practitioners are prepared by pre-service institutions to serve their clients with strong

clinical skills and a firm ethical standing. CACREP focuses on five standards:

counseling; supervision; teaching; research and scholarship; and advocacy and

leadership. This is in line with the American Counseling Association's (ACA) 20/20

initiative to agree upon a unified definition of counseling services (Even & Robinson, 2013).

The Education Trust is a national non-profit organization founded in 1990 with the mission of reforming public education in the United States. With a tighter focus on higher education, they began providing training to school counselors to support their mission and better prepare students for higher education in the mid 1990's (Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010). In 2003, the Education Trust established The National Center for Transforming School Counseling, setting social justice advocacy as a moral imperative for school counselors (Martin, 2002). Their stated mission is to transform counselors into powerful agents of change that are prepared to advocate for "education equity, access to a rigorous college and career readiness curriculum, and academic success for all students" (EdTrust, 2011).

In 2010, College Board, which is a national non-profit organization aiming to increase college readiness and access for all students, created an advocacy and policy center in order to increase connections and collaboration between policy, research, and practice (Molee, 2012). College Board and the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA), promote the role of school counselors in supporting student aspirations for college attainment (College Board, 2010; Molee, 2012).

First Lady Michelle Obama's Reach Higher Initiative (Reach Higher, 2019) started in 2014, was born out of multiple collaborations with school counseling advocates and continues to highlight the work that school counselors do in preparing students for college and careers. This initiative is similar to and supports previous national legislation like the National Education Defense Act, regarding student preparation for success in the

workforce (Carey & Martin, 2017). Despite losing steam when the Obamas left the White House, this initiative is still making contributions to student success and supporting school counselors through the Obama's foundation, Civic Nation (2019).

All of these organizations advocate for school counseling services on a national scale. However, it is the voice of the school counselors that need to be heard by legislators and stakeholders in decision making positions. When counselors rely on organizations to advocate for them and their students, a void is left unfilled.

**Advocacy Barriers for School Counselors**

Stone-Johnson (2015) described school counselors from within a stage model of functioning. In a play, there are center stage actors, supporting actors, stage crew, and even set designers. From within this analogy, they described school counselors as having the role of supporting actors to the lead or center stage actors, who would be comprised of teachers and administrative positions. School counselors are insiders to the workings of the 'play of education' yet, are outsiders to the policies that determine what happens among the script. Similarly, school counselors are insiders to what happens in schools, yet are most often outsiders to creation of policy, legislation, and even school board decisions which have a direct effect on how they work with their students. Engaging in advocacy in the public arena or at the systems level requires an insider's understanding of power dynamics and political activism in order to seek equity and just allocation of resources creating systemic and structural change in society (Lee et al., 2013). For school counselors, this can be difficult to achieve because of multiple barriers.

**Schedule Constraints**.  For a working school counselor, the idea of advocating with legislators in our ever dynamic and tumultuous political domain can be daunting and intimidating, considering the limited time and energy that they may have after the work day (McMahan, Singh, Urbano, & Haston, 2010).  Though advocacy is considered one of the pillars onto which a school counseling program is developed, time for advocacy at the systemic level is not included in the ASCA model's recommended use of time (Stone-Johnson, 2015).

Haskins and Singh (2016) developed the School Counselor Advocacy Assessment based on the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2010) in order to evaluate pre-service and practicing school counselors in the areas of advocacy.  However, systems level advocacy was left out because facilitating change in systemic processes was deemed to possibly exceed the limitations of the school day and lack of resources school counselors may have to do this type of work (Haskins & Singh, 2016).

Moving state and national level legislation can be seen as a slow cooker, as opposed to a microwave because nothing happens quickly (Gambill, M., personal communication, November, 2016).  Achieving a goal or vision for the profession can take quite a long time because legislative and organizational bodies are often resistant to change (Lee & Rodgers, 2009).  Conversely, sometimes school counselors encounter roadblocks simply because of the political expediency that can sometimes arise with certain bills.  When unexpected legislation is dropped onto the House or Senate floor, counselors often have to change gears quickly to be able to respond and many find this to be frustrating in that goal setting can seem almost impossible and fruitless (Lee et al., 2013).   The typical work of a school counselor is inside a school building with students,

which can make getting to legislative meetings and hearings almost impossible, whether they are scheduled in advance or not.

**Lack of Policy Research**.  Counseling advocacy at the legislative level is an underdeveloped concept, therefore the cost (financial and emotional) of this work, specific actions for advocacy, as well as how to become an advocate at this level is unclear (Chibbaro, 2006; Crawford, Arnold, & Brown, 2014).  Additionally, there has been very little policy research conducted on school based counseling (Sink & Carey, 2018).  In order to achieve the lofty goals of educational legislation, more research concerning the role school counselors play and how policy implementation influences school counselor knowledge is needed (Lauterbach, Harrington, Yakut, & Krezmien, 2018).  Parikh, Post, and Flowers (2011) also found that there is a lack of research about social justice advocacy behaviors of school counselors and that the personal belief systems and political ideologies of school counselors can promote or hinder advocacy practice among school counselors.  In addition, research regarding legislation or policies in counseling often does not include the specialty of school counseling, despite being equally affected (Mascari & Webber, 2013).

**Higher Education/Pre-Service Preparation**.  It is the responsibility of pre-service educators to instruct counselors in training about social justice principles including frameworks of how to advocate for their clients and foster development of advocate identities and skills in their students (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Hill, Harrawood, Vereen, & Doughty, 2012).  Reiner, Dobmeier, and Hernandez (2013) emphasized that, "the essential roles of counselor educators are to train students to develop a strong counselor identity and to advocate for the profession" (p.181).  However, limited research

exists that can help counselor educators increase their students' skills in social justice advocacy because models of pedagogical practice to teach these skills do not exist (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Havlik, Malott, Yee, DeRosato, & Crawford, 2019). Despite CACREP mandates for counselor educators to develop counselor identity and the desire to advocate for the profession within their students, pre-service institutions are not teaching legislative advocacy skills to their students (Chang et al., 2012) and many counselor educators are not active in advocacy (Carey & Martin, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Reiner et al., 2013). According to Lee, Smith, and Henry (2013), most counselor educators do not have enough experience as social justice advocates to enable them to teach a course. Additionally, there is little research available on the experiences of school counselors engaging in advocacy work at the public arena level (Havlik, Malott, Yee, DeRosato, & Crawford, 2019).

  **"Nice Counselor Syndrome"**. Griffin and Steen (2011) identified barriers that school counselors experience when advocating for low income and students of color. Some of these barriers were that school counselors are fearful of working outside the boundaries of their school buildings, a fear of confronting a status quo and bending the rules, and frustration with taking on social justice issues that may take significant amounts of time to resolve. It is important for human service leaders, such as school counselors, to closely comply with all ethical codes and acknowledge the fundamental power and status disparities at work before engaging in systemic advocacy interventions (Bradley, Worth, & Hastings, 2012; Snow, 2010). Due to the fact that social justice advocacy work is often complicated, non-linear, and likely challenges the status-quo, school counselors are often fearful of bringing about negative professional and personal

consequences for speaking up (Lee & Rodgers, 2009; Lee & Na, 2017). In concert with other findings, Havlik et al. (2019) found that school counselors specifically fear losing their source of income through a job loss which creates a reluctance to advocate for their role.

Bemak and Chung (2008) described the phenomenon of 'Nice Counselor Syndrome' delineating personal and professional factors that intimidate school counselors from becoming systems level advocates. Some personal factors identified were anxiety/fear and personal discomfort of being disliked or labeled as a troublemaker, being complacent with what exists, a false sense of powerlessness, and anger which sometimes leads to ineffective responses to injustice. Professional obstacles identified were resistance based on professional boundaries or not wanting to step on other's toes, responding to administrative demands, professional reputation attacks, and even job security. Counselors are often seen as the 'nice' people in the building and it can be very disconcerting for some counselors to challenge this stereotype.

## Chapter Summary

Counselor leadership has been defined as "the actions of professional counselors that contribute to the realization of our individual and collective capacity to serve others competently, ethically, and justly" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 5). True school counseling advocates recognize the power in making sure that our training is respected and recognized by stakeholders, the credentials we have are meaningful, and that we are supported through legislation and policies to speak on behalf of our students (Clark & Myers, 2011). For a counselor to be successful in advocacy, they must have a strategic vision, data utilization skills that create a sense of urgency, and the courage to stand up to

those in power. "School counselors who wish to work as advocates for students and families within an equity framework must display leadership skills, knowledge of program development, and the ability to communicate and build relationships among and between individuals" (Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2018) fully engaged in the roles of leadership, advocacy, systemic change, and collaboration (ASCA, 2012).

While there is continued and documented need for school counselors to engage in advocacy at the legislative/public arena level, there is little training or research available to support counselors in developing these skills. Though counselors advocating for themselves and their profession is not a natural act, if we are not actively engaged in these efforts, it will be our students who suffer (McCurdy, K. & Gillig, S., 2005). Thus, this study sought to describe the lived experience of school counselor leaders engaging in collaboration and advocacy at the legislative/public arena level in order to create systemic change for students.

**CHAPTER 3**

**METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of school counseling leaders that have engaged in legislative/public arena level advocacy.  School counselors often do not know how they can serve as advocates for the profession or make far reaching systemic changes for students in the larger systems (e.g. local schools, school systems, communities, political systems) within which they exist.  The focus of this constructivist qualitative study was to illuminate the experiences of school counselors who have advocated for school counseling at the systems/legislative level.  Specifically, the research question that guided this study was, "What are the experiences of school counselor leaders who advocate for the school counseling profession at the systems or legislative level?"  This chapter discusses the rationale for the use of qualitative research, specifically, transcendental phenomenological analysis, and describes specific methods and procedures for sampling, data collection, data analysis, and ensuring trustworthiness.

**Qualitative Research**

A thorough review of relevant literature demonstrates the importance of advocacy for school counseling services and the challenges school counselors face in actively participating in advocacy work (Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2018; Dollarhide, 2003; Lewis, Smith, & Henry, 2013; Storlie, Woo, Fink, & Fowler, 2019; Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013).  Additionally, multiple calls to the field for systemic level advocacy from school counselors were highlighted (ASCA, 2012, 2016, 2019; Crook, Stenger &

Gesselman, 2015; EdTrust, 2011; Hippolito & Delgado, 2007; Lewis, Toporek, & Ratts, 2010; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013).  Qualitative research allowed me to describe the experiences of school counselors as they developed into leaders active in advocacy work.  I was able to answer 'what' that experience is like as opposed to just detailing 'how' they went about it (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative research is "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem," encouraging an inductive style of reasoning (Creswell, 2014, p.4).  Often, attempts at succinct definitions of qualitative research cover what it is about and involves, as opposed to what it actually is (Aspers & Corte, 2019).  Despite confusion and lack of clarity in the field, Aspers and Corte (2019) defined qualitative research as "an interactive process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions, resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (p. 155).  Through the flexible structure and emergent quality of qualitative research, the researcher is able to be a critical component in unfolding the inquiry and findings, enabling them to contribute to the ongoing professional conversation (Creswell, 2014).  Qualitative research is naturalistic, interpretive, and inductive, unbound by a pre-existing framework (Mayan, 2016).  It is inductive and recursive because the data drives the understanding of the phenomena while the researcher consistently moves back and forth between the process and reflection on the process, while emphasizing the shared experiences of the researcher and the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Key characteristics of qualitative research include inductive and abductive analysis (generating explanations from observations as opposed to testing theories),

naturalistic and experimental settings, emphasis on context provided by the participants, focus on the humanness of the research as opposed to just the numbers, purposive sampling (recruiting specific participants that have experience with a specific phenomenon), thick descriptions (vivid details constructed to tell a detailed story), and flexible research designs (Creswell, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012; Mayan, 2016). In this study, this means that I worked in conjunction with and focused on the experiences of actual school counselor leaders that have experienced advocacy activities and appropriately adjusted my procedures to make sure that I utilized rich detail in order to share their stories in a way that readers will have a clear picture of them. Qualitative research gave my participants' voices a platform, focused on their needs, and acknowledged their strengths and challenges, ultimately offering a source of empowerment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2005:2).

Constructivism, as a qualitative research paradigm, emerged between 1970 and 1987 (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist paradigm stresses that an individual's understanding of the world is of their own construction, and that no one individual's construction of reality is the absolute truth, but their own perception of reality (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 2013). People desire to make sense of the world in which they live and work, constructing their worldview through their experiences in the world (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative ontology asserts that reality is relative and things exist independently of being understood, while the epistemology of qualitative research emphasizes that reality and knowledge are created through interactions between individuals and their world (Creswell, Hanson, Plano-Clark, & Morales, 2007; Crotty, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The goals of this research study were compatible with the qualitative and constructivist research paradigm. School counselor leaders that are active in legislative/public arena advocacy work have a unique perspective and knowledge base regarding how to advance the school counseling profession through legislation, such as reduced counselor/student ratios, consistent school counselor evaluation tools, and agreed upon system-wide models of comprehensive school counseling programming. Describing these highly complex, interactive and socially constructed interactions takes deep inquiry and rich descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Understanding how school counselor leaders advocate with legislators and how they experience that work will help to better prepare pre-service school counselors with advocacy skills and encourage current school counselors to be more involved. Seeing the experience of legislative/public arena advocacy work through my participants' eyes was the ultimate goal of this study.

## Phenomenology

The phenomenological research approach comes from psychological, anthropological, and philosophical roots giving a composite description of the essence of lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Mayan, 2009; Merriam, 2014). Husserl originally shared concerns about errors in research while attempting to study human thought with the scientific method and thus developed what we now know as phenomenology (Mayan, 2016). van Manen (2001, p.9) explained that phenomenology allows researchers to, "gain a deeper understanding of the nature of our everyday experiences." It is examining an understanding of the lived experiences of one or more individuals undergoing a particular phenomenon as described by the individuals (Moustakas, 1994; Johnson &

Christensen, 2014). The primary goal of phenomenological knowledge is "the understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 14).

Researchers write phenomenological studies in such a way that the reader has a better understanding of what it is like to experience a certain phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007). It is important to note that phenomenology does not follow rule books or standard social science practices of gathering data, but can be more of a reflective gathering and structural analysis of the essences of experiences; basically, a rigorous science of transcendental phenomena (van Manen, 2014). It is not a study of objects, experiences or things, but a study of the experience of these things. Because I wanted to be able to describe the experiences of school counselor leaders advocating at a legislative level and not merely study the numbers of school counselors that are advocating, a phenomenological approach was the best fit for this study.

Several assumptions exist in the philosophical worldview of constructivism, which hold that meaning for human beings comes from engaging in the world around us, we make sense of our world based on historical and social perspectives, and that we create meaning out of social interaction with others (Creswell, 2014). With a constructivist worldview, the researcher and participants have greater participation. Considering that a key to qualitative research is that the researcher is also seen as and functions as the instrument framing the findings of the study, I was able to co-create meaning with my participants. The constructive approach of phenomenology in this study allowed for multiple realities and perspectives of these school counselor leaders to define the phenomenon (Hays & Wood, 2011).

Transcendental phenomenology was chosen for this study because of its focus on making meaning of participants' experiences through providing rich descriptions of the phenomena (Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). The focus of transcendental phenomenology is describing the experiences of the phenomena through the eyes of the participant and bracketing the researcher's assumption of it; a process otherwise known as epoche or bracketing (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). This allows the researcher to develop descriptions of the essence of the experiences as opposed to developing explanations or analyses of the participant's statements (Creswell et. al, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). It does not explore the 'what' of an experience, but our experience of the 'what' (van Manen, 2014). In phenomenology, there exists a fundamental theme of reduction and going 'back to the things themselves' that was originally promoted by Husserl, encouraging researchers to investigate the issues that really matter (van Manan, 2014).

Moustakas (1994) outlined six steps to conducting a phenomenological study. The first step is to identify a phenomenon to study, followed by bracketing out the researcher's experience with and biases related to the phenomenon. Next, researchers collect data from multiple participants, typically in the form of interviews. Then, the data is analyzed through "phenomenological reduction" by reducing the interviews to significant quotes and statements. Once this is completed, the statements are combined to develop themes that emerge from the data, seeking and honoring multiple meanings through imaginative variation. At this point, the researcher writes rich, textural and structural descriptions of the experiences. The last step in a phenomenological study is the synthesis of a combined statement of both the textural and structural descriptions in

order to convey the essence of the experiences. This phenomenological research process corresponds with how school counselors interact with their students, asking for detailed explanations and seeking the essences of the students' experiences in order to help them (Hays & Wood, 2011). The steps in the process allowed me to, "nurture a measure of thoughtfulness and tact in the practice of our professions and in everyday life" (van Manen, 2014; p.31)

## Participants

One characteristic of qualitative research is that the participants are seen as co-researchers as they share their experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2002). Researchers using a qualitative methodology get in much closer contact with their data and their participants than with quantitative methodologies that espouse researchers distancing themselves from participants (Creswell, 2014). As I sought to understand my participants' experiences of advocating at a legislative or public arena level, qualitative research executed through a constructivist phenomenological approach was the best fit for this study.

Utilizing purposive criterion sampling, potential participants were identified through my established professional networks identifying school counselor leaders with experience in legislative/public arena level advocacy. Snowball sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) was also used to to identify subsequent and additional participants. I requested referrals from my participants regarding other school counselor leaders that might fit the criteria for this study. Though phenomenological studies do not typically have a large sample size, they do need enough participants to offer different experiences regarding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I identified 12 participants based on

Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation of recruiting between five and 25 participants in order to achieve thematic saturation (Morrow, 2007).

Criteria for participation in this study was certified school counselors in the United States with at least three years of school counseling experience. In addition, participants needed to have experience advocating to policy makers or legislators that have influence over policies or legislation that affects school counseling in their respective states or school systems. Participants answered questions about their legislative/public arena advocacy activities on a demographic questionnaire. Examples of acceptable legislative/public arena advocacy for participation in this study included communication with legislators or other elected officials (e.g. Board of Education members). More specific examples of activities involved: contact with state legislators or school board members regarding school counseling via telephone or in person, visiting the state capital as part of a state school counselor association government affairs/advocacy day, testifying at a legislative or education board hearing, or presenting to legislators and/or education board members at local community listening sessions.

In order to identify willing participants, I e-mailed school counselors that have been engaged in legislative advocacy across the United States. See Appendix B for the email recruitment letter. I also e-mailed colleagues in my professional networks developed over the last 18 years of experience as a school counselor seeking suggestions of names for potential participants whom I then reached out to through e-mail. The purpose of the study was explained, as well as the rationale for why participation from experienced school counselors and advocates is important. I also explained that I am seeking their participation as co-researchers through interviews and examination of

resumes.  After receiving responses to my e-mail invitation, I proceeded to schedule interviews with willing participants asking for completion of a demographic questionnaire and to also provide resumes to me at least two days prior to the scheduled interview in order to familiarize myself with participant backgrounds before the interviews.  Prior to the interview, participants were asked for signatures on forms indicating informed consent, an understanding of confidentiality, and an understanding of the role of primary researcher and research participant, all in keeping with ethical research principles (Moustakas, 1994).  The American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011) has specific standards for researchers to follow regarding informed consent, reminding researchers to follow ethical guidelines, protect vulnerable populations, and maintain integrity throughout the research process.  Federal regulations also exist requiring that research participants provide informed consent prior to participating in any study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).  Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of this study and that they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.  Anonymity of the participants was ensured by the adoption of self-selected pseudonyms.  See Appendix A for the interview protocol that was utilized in this study.  See Appendix D for the University of Georgia consent letter for this study.

## Procedure

In accordance with institutional requirements, I applied to the UGA Institutional Review Board for approval of this study involving human subjects.  After receiving approval, I utilized purposive sampling to identify appropriate participants.  I then e-mailed prospective participants to request their participation.  Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants using an open-ended interview protocol, utilizing

clarifying questions when necessary.  After the initial interviews, I used snowball

sampling to identify additional participants appropriate to the study by requesting

participants to share names of colleagues who have experience advocating on a

legislative or systems level.

**Data Collection**

      **Demographic Questionnaire.**  Each participant was sent a brief demographic

questionnaire to complete prior to the interview.  The questionnaire asked questions

about racial/ethnic identities, gender identification, socio-economic status, years of

experience as a certified school counselor, and experience in advocacy work at the public

arena level.  See Appendix C for the demographic questionnaire utilized in this study.

      **Resumes.**  Each participant provided a copy of their most recent resume.  These

documents provided evidence of their professional history and development as school

counselors.  In addition, the resumes provided supportive evidence of participants'

experiences and data identified in the transcripts.

      **Semi-Structured Interviews.**  After review of the demographic questionnaires

and the resumes, in-depth semi-structured interviews varying in length from 60-90

minutes were conducted related to participants' professional experiences advocating at

the legislative/public arena level.  As the primary researcher, I was the only interviewer.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom (a video conferencing software platform).  My

location during the video conferenced interviews was at my home office, where

interruptions were restricted and privacy was ensured.  All interviews were recorded with

an audio-recording device and Zoom technology.

Participants were asked to answer open-ended interview questions developed from the literature review in support of the research question and in accordance with a phenomenological framework (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Tuttle, Grimes, Lopez-Perry, 2019). Open ended questions gave the participants the opportunity to voice their own opinions and thoughts regarding the phenomenon. Questions were focused on participants' lived experiences advocating for school counseling at the public arena level. Though an interview protocol was followed, I asked clarifying questions in order to allow for consideration of other emerging themes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim as they were completed and then coded by a research team.

As it is almost impossible to remain completely removed from the research process, it is important for researchers to be aware of their contributions to the construction of the meanings of the participants' lived experiences (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Caricativo, 2017). After each interview, I recorded initial thoughts and wonderings in a reflexivity journal. This helped to capture reflections immediately following the interview which assisted me in facilitating insight as I determined my findings (Maxwell, 2013). Keeping this reflexivity journal helped me keep an account of my own experience and bias.

**Data Analysis**

There is no one single and correct way to analyze qualitative data, which makes it an eclectic process (Creswell, 2002). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) stated that "qualitative coding is a way of opening up avenues of inquiry" enabling the researcher to identify and develop concepts and analytic insights through close examination of and reflection on data (p.151). Though the complexity of qualitative research has been

compared to a kaleidoscope, the beauty of qualitative data analysis is that it gives a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Mayan, 2009). The goal of this study was to gain that holistic understanding of what it is like for school counselor leaders to advocate at the legislative/public arena level in order to encourage other school counselors to get involved in advocacy work aimed at advancing the profession.

**Phenomenological Reduction.** Prior to data collection, phenomenological researchers must start with the epoche process, which carries into every stage of research (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In Greek, the word epoche means abstention, or to stay away from something (van Manen, 2014). Epoche is a technique to increase the researcher's awareness of how their own experience or bias could interfere or play into the research and allow a release of these biases in order to look at the phenomenon with a fresh eye (Creswell, 1998, Merriam, 2009, Moustakas, 1994). The process of epoche, also known as bracketing, throughout the interview and data analysis process, ensured that information gathered will be from the participants' perceptions (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen 2014). Moustakas (1994) described phenomenological reduction as, "describing in textural language just what one sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between the phenomenon and the self" (p.90). I engaged in constant reflection and re-reflection as I went through the research process to ensure that I grasped the full nature of the experience of school counselors advocating at the legislative/public arena level.

**Phenomenological Data Analysis.** A pre-selected research team began the data analysis process together. My research team consisted of two doctoral candidates that

have experience with qualitative research and an interest in advocating for the counseling profession. One of the candidates had experience as a school counselor and thus able to relate to the experiences of my participants. The other candidate had counseling experience, but not within schools and was therefore able to check any biases that may have come into data analysis and prevented these biases from effecting the analysis process.

In phenomenological studies, the data analysis begins with the first set of data (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the research team conducted a close reading of the first three transcripts as they were completed, highlighting statements that stand out as meaningful (van Manen, 2014). Patton (1990) asserted that the first step in content analysis is to scrutinize what is there and label it. The research team then independently coded their highlighted statements, compiled and agreed upon a list of codes that emerged through a constant comparative method (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparative analysis is a process where data are compared so that certain commonalities and properties emerge and are brought together (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I then continued my analysis with the subsequent transcripts as I continued to familiarize myself with the data through the coding process in order to refine and connect some of its essential features while highlighting my participants' voices throughout the analysis. Throughout this process, I became familiar with these school counselors' stories and began to see commonalities emerging in the data.

Themes were organized based on similarities between the initial codes, removing repetition and overlap, and refining the description of each category (Moustakas, 1994).

Patterns in the themes and recurring units of data were identified that helped to describe the commonalities in the participants' experiences. Examples of these recurring units of data were shared or common experiences with legislators and their staff, similarities in frustrations with the advocacy process, measures of excitement over progress, or even correlating thought processes regarding learning to utilize political savvy in different environments. Horizonalization, allowed me to ensure non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements were identified in the data assigning equal value to each statement carrying significant meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Honoring the phenomenological approach, I was able to utilize participant quotes to maintain the "voices" of my participants (Moustakas, 1994).

## Trustworthiness

Phenomenological researchers "endeavor to discern the essence of participants' lived experiences and to lay aside their prevailing understandings of a phenomenon to authentically explore the participants' experiences" (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018, p. 35). Efforts were made to support the trustworthiness of the findings through reflexivity, triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement with the data, and thick and rich descriptions of the essence of the participants' experiences, and an audit trail which is all more fully discussed below (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). I actively engaged in intentional reflection during the entire research process by memo-ing in a reflexivity journal, which assisted me in bracketing my own assumptions and biases related to legislative/public arena advocacy work. See Appendix E for the memo summary sheet I used during this study.

A research team of two doctoral candidates from the counseling field with qualitative research experience aided in ensuring trustworthiness through triangulation, peer debriefing and reviews of the data, codes and themes. Triangulation requires that, "Two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare findings" (Patton, 2015, p.665). An initial in-person meeting was conducted after the first two interviews were transcribed and individually coded, where we agreed on codes and developed a code book to be used for subsequent interviews. After I coded the following interviews, we debriefed about the themes and agreed on the findings before they were finalized.

**Reflexivity Journal.** A reflexivity journal was one source of trustworthiness in my study. This journal assisted me in identifying how my contributions to the co-construction of meaning of the lived experiences affect the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It documented and preserved how I explored and examined the ways that my involvement in the research process informs this study.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is the process of gathering data on the same topic through multiple methods, data sources, or theories (Creswell, 2002; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). "This ensures that the study will be accurate because the information is not drawn from a single source, individual or process of data collection. In this way, it encourages the researcher to develop a report that is both accurate and credible" (Creswell, 2002; p. 280). Participants were asked to provide the most recent copy of their resume. These resumes were examined to find patterns that arose among the participants' education, years of experience, leadership development and activities, and contributions to the field of school counseling. By utilizing interviews and resumes, I was able to

provide corroborative and supportive evidence of my findings from the transcripts and reduced the risk of chance associations and systemic biases (Creswell, 2013).

**Prolonged Engagement.** A hallmark of qualitative studies is the extended amount of time that the researcher spends investigating the phenomenon and analyzing the data (Creswell, 2014). Data collection analysis in qualitative research provides depth to the data by supplying context and insight (van Manen, 2014). By spending a considerable amount of time studying the phenomenon through my participants, I was able to become more familiar with my participants' experiences and thus, able to produce more rigorous research (Mayan, 2009). Conducting extended interviews and checking back with my participants allowed me to ensure that I have spent enough time with my participants and their stories, increasing my understanding of the experiences.

**Member Checking.** Member checking is imperative in establishing trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and one of the most important aspects of validity and credibility in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After I completed transcribing each interview, I sent the transcription to the participant to review and make changes or give their approval. Second interviews were scheduled with willing participants to discuss themes and findings. Member checking confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and the findings, providing an opportunity for co-creation of meaning (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

**Thick and Rich Descriptions.** In an effort to maintain my participants' voices, I utilized important quotes and phrases directly from my participants. This helped to build the descriptions of experiences with the phenomenon of advocating at a legislative level and successfully bracketed my own experience and biases. Creswell (2014) presented

direct quotes as low inference descriptors and a highly valuable validity enhancing strategy. With vivid details and stories about the experiences, I was able to create a vision for the reader that provides a clear picture of common experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Thick and rich descriptions are a cornerstone of qualitative and phenomenological research that increase the rigor and enhance the validity, as in these descriptions and stories, lie the data that is reduced to communicate the common experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014).

**Audit Trail.** An audit trail was utilized during the study collecting research study timelines, informed consent, participant demographic questionnaires, interview protocol, transcriptions, and memos/reflexivity journal regarding my thoughts and feelings during the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The collection and maintenance of these documents helped to minimize any of my own bias and ensure that my data is accurate (Patton, 2002).

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**Researcher Positionality Statement**

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In qualitative studies, researchers declare their assumptions, biases, and experiences in an effort to bracket the influence on the research process. This increases their ability to remain focused on the participants' experiences, stories and voices, while also allowing readers to assess their possible influences (Creswell, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014).

*Considering my professional experience and dedication to the field of school counseling, I identify as a school counselor leader. This has been integrated into who I am as a person. However, this has developed over time and through some frustrations. After about five years working as the only school counselor at an elementary school with*

*over 800 students, I was growing tired. My school had been recognized by the American School Counselor Association as a Recognized American School Counselor Association Model Program (RAMP) school. I was determined to maintain a comprehensive school counseling program, but I knew that I needed help. My principal told me that she wanted to hire another counselor, but the funding was not available.*

*With this frustration brewing inside me, I answered a call from the Georgia School Counseling Association's (GSCA) President to attend a listening session with a newly hired lobbyist during a conference. In between breakout sessions, I met the lobbyist and spoke with the GSCA President about my frustrations and how underserved my students were because of my outrageous caseload. Shortly after this meeting, I received an e-mail from the GSCA President asking me to take on the role of advocacy co-chairperson for GSCA. It was from this point that my leadership in systemic level advocacy work really began.*

*After meeting with inspiring leaders in our state counseling organization and learning as much as I could in a short period of time, I began my time on our state counseling organization leadership and executive board. During my tenure on this Board, because of my leadership positions and work as a school counselor, I have been awarded local, state, and national recognitions. I was recognized as Counselor of the Year by the Gwinnett County Public School System, the Georgia School Counselors Association, and finally as a top five finalist for the ASCA School Counselor of the Year. Additionally, I had applied for and received the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) award along with my counseling partners four times at three different schools (one being a re-RAMP, which meant the school was certified a second time). The RAMP*

*award recognizes school counseling programs from around the country that are able to prove, through data and documentation, that they serve their students through a comprehensive school counseling program.*

*Along with these recognitions have come opportunities to advocate for school counseling with both state and national level legislators. I have served as an advocacy co-chair on my state counseling association's board through multiple presidents and boards. In this position, I have developed multiple relationships with legislators that are supportive of school counseling services. These relationships have proven critical when legislation regarding school counseling and students are proposed during the legislative sessions. As a result of these relationships, legislators that know me by name and have my cell number will contact me to ask my opinion on legislation that should be proposed and/or supported by way of vote.*

*Several years ago, I had the privilege and opportunity to address a juvenile justice hearing committee on legislation regarding mandatory reporting of child abuse. That was one of the most exhilarating advocacy experiences of my career. Legislators, who often seem scary, out of touch, and intimidating, asked thoughtful questions about what school counselors do and truly listened to my input. They wanted to help us help children by writing legislation that would mandate clearer communication between child service agencies and school counselors serving as mandatory and designated reporters of child abuse. Towards the end of the hearing, I was asked to stand with the House attorney to help draft the language in the bill that my testimony was impacting! My words now exist as a law in my state. Recently, I was able to present to a House Education Appropriations Subcommittee about funding for school counselors in our state*

*in which I asked for over 24 million dollars that would decrease the school counselor to student ratio. They asked questions about what I do and truly appeared to understand what challenges school counselors face with a sincere pledge to help. They followed through on their pledge by accommodating our request of funds in their recommended budget to our state's Governor. What these opportunities mean to me is the importance of practitioners speaking up for what we do because the legislators do not know unless they hear from us. Legislators are making daily decisions that affect our students. If we do not speak up from the depths of our passion for helping students, they will only hear the voices of lobbyists when our organizations can afford them. Though lobbyists may really support school counselors, at the end of the day, they are not the ones doing the work.*

*One of the most frequent requests to our small advocacy committee is to identify protégés to train in advocacy work who would then follow our lead as they become more involved. Though there have been a few counselors that have expressed some interest, we have had a very difficult time finding school counselors able and willing to jump into such a high-profile and demanding position within our organization. This work is tiring, time consuming, and takes longevity. School counselors need to be prepared, willing, able, and excited to step up and join those on the front lines. During this study, it was imperative that I reflected upon my passion for legislative advocacy and my desire to inspire other school counselors to step up and join those that are already using their voices to create systemic change for our students via legislative actions.*

*Several of my intersectional identities are also salient in this study. I identify as a middle aged White, heterosexual, cis-gendered, educated female that was raised in a*

*middle to upper middle class family in the Southeastern United States. I acknowledge the*

*tremendous privilege that comes with these identities and life situations. I recognize that*

*my areas of privilege may grant me audiences and attention by those in power because of*

*ingrained, systemic, and most likely un-checked biases they may have. Politics in my*

*region of the country are still deeply rooted in the long established 'good ol' boy' system*

*that allows access to some and only to those that know how to navigate the political*

*system. Change is happening, but nothing happens quickly in the 'slow cooker' of*

*politics. However, politicians do listen to the bottom line and respond to numbers. If*

*school counselors would appeal to the politicians with strength in numbers, we would be*

*able to make much further reaching change than we have historically been able to do.*

*My experience and knowledge regarding mixing school counseling with politicians has*

*taught me that we must not shy away, but show up and speak. I firmly believe, as Maya*

*Angelou stated:*

> *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do*
>
> *better."*

*I want school counselors to know the experiences of school counselor leaders that*

*have advocated at the legislative level, so that we can collectively 'do better' for our*

*students. I believe that many school counselors could overcome their lack of knowledge*

*and resulting fears regarding advocating on a systemic/legislative level if they*

*understood what other school counselors experienced as they answered those calls.*

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter explained how transcendental phenomenological qualitative research

methodology was used to answer the research question, "What are the experiences of

school counselor leaders who advocate for the school counseling profession at the legislative/public arena level?" The participant pool was composed of twelve school counseling leaders with three or more years of experience who have advocated at the public arena level (eg. local education boards to state or national level legislators). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were coded by a research team to identify themes and commonalities in the data. From the data, I was able to describe, with thick, rich, and vivid detail, the lived experiences of school counselor leaders who have advocated at the public arena level.

**CHAPTER 4**

**FINDINGS**

This chapter presents a summary of findings of a qualitative study examining school counseling leaders' experiences advocating at the legislative/public arena level. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate at the public arena level. The following research question guided the exploration into this phenomenon: What are the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level? Participant responses to the interview questions produced thick, descriptions of their experiences and will be detailed later in the chapter.

Chapter 4 provides findings from 12 semi-structured interviews with school counseling leaders located throughout the United States. Following an introduction of the 12 school counseling leaders is a table that summarizes demographic information provided by the participants. The subsequent section summarizes the findings from the 12 participant interviews to highlight common themes and emphasize the horizons of the participant quotes (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The seven themes that emerged from the data are: (a) Understanding the legislative learning curve, (b) Building confidence, (c) Balancing roles, (d) Building and maintaining relationships, (e) Working collectively, (f) Dealing with resistance, and (g) Using your voice for change.

**PARTICIPANTS**

This study included 12 school counseling leaders from across the United States: Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Each participant had three or more years of experience as a school counselor and participated in advocacy activities at the legislative/public arena level.  There were seven participants who identified as female and five participants who identified as male.

All participants served in leadership positions in their state school counseling association and/or the American School Counseling Association (ASCA).  Ten of the participants have served as president of their respective state's school counseling association.  Eight of the participants served on American School Counselor Association committees and four served as ASCA executive board members.  Additionally, two of the participants were selected as American School Counselors of the Year.  These state and national positions are not highlighted in the following summaries to protect the anonymity of the participants, but serve as supportive evidence of the participants' leadership and advocacy experiences.  Below is a summary of each participant, based on their answers to the demographic questionnaire and information from their resumes. Participants' chose pseudonyms for this study to maintain anonymity.

Amanda self-identifies as a White middle class, female who lives in Wisconsin. She is currently employed as the "School Counseling and Transitions Coordinator" in her district. Amanda has a Master's degree and 18 years of experience as a school counselor. Amanda described her public arena advocacy activities as participating in 'Day on the Hill' activities with her state counseling association, personal outreach to her state legislature, as well as personal meetings with federal legislators.  Additionally, she has

presented at local, state and national levels on numerous occasions. She has held

multiple leadership positions in two different state school counseling associations.

Bryan lives in Massachusetts and self-identifies as a White, middle class, male.

Currently, he is employed as a high school counselor and director of school counseling in

his district. Bryan has a Master's degree, Certificate of Advanced Degree and 27 years of

experience as a school counselor. Bryan has engaged in meetings with elected officials

in his district, his state legislature and with federal legislators. During the span of his

counseling career, he held multiple leadership positions in his state school counseling

association. He published articles in several school counseling related publications and

presented at the local, state, and national level numerous times. Additionally, Bryan

served as an adjunct professor at multiple colleges and universities in his region over the

last 19 years.

Emily is a native Georgian who self-identifies as a White, middle class, female

employed as an Assistant Professor in the counseling department at a university in her

region. Emily earned her Doctoral degree and has 13 years of experience as a school

counselor. In her public arena advocacy work, she served as a government relations

committee member in her state association in which she attended multiple 'Day on the

Hill' events and engaged in purposeful conversation with state and national legislators.

Additionally, she planned similar events for her graduate counseling students on a yearly

basis for multiple years and regularly attends events of her local elected officials. She

held multiple leadership positions in two different state school counseling organizations.

Emily authored and co-authored numerous research articles related to school counseling,

published a book centered on school counseling interventions, and contributed multiple book chapters.

Emma self-identifies as a White, middle class, female who lives in Virginia, currently serving as the Administrative Coordinator of School Counseling in her district. Emma has a Master's degree and is a candidate for a Certificate in Educational Leadership with 16 years of experience as a school counselor. Emma regularly attends her local/county legislative town halls, and state school counseling association advocacy legislative days. Additionally, she has spoken in front of multiple Virginia General Assembly committees. Emma served on the government relations committee in her state school counseling association. For her service in the school counseling field, she has received multiple local, state, and national awards including the Recognized ASCA Model Program. She has authored and co-authored multiple articles in counseling related publications and has presented on a local, state and national level.

Etta James lives in Arizona and self-identifies as a White, middle class, female. She is currently the department chair of her school counseling department working as a high school counselor. She has a Master's degree and 15 years of experience as a school counselor. Etta James attends her state association's annual 'Day on the Hill' and has advocated at the federal level on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. She has held multiple leadership positions in her state school counseling association and received multiple awards for her counseling service at both the state and national level.

Freeman, a Black/Nigerian-American, middle class, male, lives in Georgia and works as a middle school counselor. Freeman has an Education Specialist degree and three years of experience as a school counselor. His public arena advocacy activities

have included speaking to his local county's Board of Education, attending legislative meetings, and serving as a community organizer raising awareness of systemic issues in school systems. Freeman has presented at the local, state, and national levels on numerous occasions and has held multiple leadership positions in his state school counseling association.

Jessie lives in Georgia and self-identifies as a retired, White, middle class, female. Though she is retired from working in schools, she works as a self-employed consultant for organizations needing direction for school counseling programming. Before retiring, she was the school counseling coordinator for her respective district. Jessie has an Education Specialist degree and 30 years of experience in school counseling. She has held multiple leadership positions for her state school counseling association, including being a member of the government relations/advocacy committee. Jessie has presented at the local, state, and national level on numerous occasions and authored multiple articles in several counseling publications.

Jim self-identifies as a White/Hispanic, middle class male who lives in Colorado. He has sixteen years of experience as a school counselor and is currently working as a Department Chair in a high school counseling department. Jim has a Master's degree and is currently in a counseling doctoral program. Jim has experience testifying in front of multiple legislative committees and was part of a team that developed legislative priorities for Colorado. Jim has held multiple leadership positions in his state school counseling association and has presented at the local, state, and national level on numerous occasions. Additionally, he has been invited and served as the keynote speaker to two other state school counseling associations for their annual conferences.

Josue is a high school counselor in California who self-identifies as a Latino/Hispanic, middle class, male. He is currently employed as a high school counselor. Josue has a Master's degree and 10 years of experience as a school counselor. His public arena advocacy experience includes presenting to and speaking with local education board members and state legislators. Josue has held multiple leadership positions in his state school counseling association as well as serving on the advocacy and legislation committee.

Rachel is a middle and high school counselor who lives in Wisconsin and self-identifies as a White, middle class, female. Rachel has a Master's degree and has 14 years of experience as a school counselor. She organized and presented at her state school counselor association's 'Day on the Hill' activities. Rachel has been active in writing communications to her state legislature regarding school counseling services while she was part of the government relations committee in her state school counselor association. She has received multiple awards for her service in education and presented at the local and state level on numerous occasions.

SCAtoZ self-identifies as a White, middle class, female living in Virginia currently employed as an elementary school counselor and a district elementary counselor mentor. SCAtoZ has a Master's degree and is currently working to complete her post master's certificate in clinical mental health. She has 14 years of experience as a school counselor. Her public arena advocacy activities include participating in state legislative days, testifying before multiple legislative committees, writing and calling legislators, collaborating with the state school counseling association's lobbyist and serving on her state school counseling association's advocacy and government relations

committee. Additionally, SCAtoZ held multiple leadership positions in her state and local county school counselor associations. SCAtoZ has published multiple school counseling related articles in school counseling publications and participated in interviews with national media.

Tim is a school counselor in North Carolina who self-identifies as a White, lower-middle class, male. Tim has a Master's degree and 11 years of experience as a school counselor. He held multiple leadership positions in his state school counselor association including serving on the government relations committee. Tim participated in numerous local and state level advocacy activities and initiatives and has testified to legislative subcommittees on several occasions. Tim has presented on a state level on numerous occasions and authored several articles regarding school counseling services.

Table 1 – Table of Participant Demographics

| Pseudonym | Race/ Ethnicity | Gender | SES | Current Job | State | Highest Degree Earned | Years of Experience as a School Counselor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amanda | White | Female | Middle Class | School Counseling Coordinator | WI | Master's | 18 |
| Bryan | White | Male | Upper Middle Class | Director of School Counselor/High School Counselor | MA | Master's/CAGS | 27 |
| Emma | White | Female | Middle Class | Administrative Coordinator of School Counseling | VA | Master's Degree | 16 |
| Emily | White | Female | Middle Class | Assistant Professor | GA | Ph.D. | 13 |
| Etta James | White | Female | Middle Class | High School Counselor | AZ | Master's Degree | 15 |
| Freeman | Black/ Nigerian-American | Male | Middle Class | Middle School Counselor | GA | Education Specialist | 3 |

Table 1 Cont.

| Pseudonym | Race/ Ethnicity | Gender | SES | Current Job | State | Highest Degree Earned | Years of Experience as a School Counselor |
|-----------|-----------------|--------|-----|-------------|-------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Jessie | White | Female | Middle Class | Retired, Self-Employed consultant | GA | Education Specialist | 30 |
| Jim | White/ Hispanic | Male | Middle Class | High School Counselor | CO | Master's Degree | 16 |
| Josue | Latino/ Hispanic | Male | Middle Class | High School Counselor | CA | Master's Degree | 10 |
| Rachel | White | Female | Middle Class | Middle & High School Counselor | WI | Master's Degree | 14 |
| SCAtoZ | White | Female | Middle Class | Elementary School Counselor & District Mentor | VA | Master's Degree | 14 |
| Tim | White | Male | Lower Middle Class | Elementary School Counselor | NC | Master's Degree | 11 |

**Discussion of Themes**

The thorough semi-structured interviews revealed multiple themes that emerged from the data. These themes will assist readers in understanding the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate at the legislative/public arena level. Presented below are the seven themes that emerged from the data.

**Understanding the Legislative Learning Curve**

The first theme that emerged from the data focused on understanding the learning curve regarding legislative language, legislative policies and procedures, and simply, knowledge about key legislators. SCAtoZ said,

> The knowledge base is the biggest thing. Not knowing where to start and how to proceed. That's been a big learning point. I had no idea what all that looked like. How to read a bill, how to write in bill language, which I still don't know. I have no idea how to do that.

Emily also shared feeling unprepared because of the depth and breadth of knowledge that is required to be competent and accepted in the political arena, stating,

> How am I going to learn all this new stuff? How am I going to cram all this stuff in my head and learn something new? … I started out equating government relations with 'politics' and I did not view myself as a political person. The humility came in the sense of, I had to learn. There were key players that I needed to know, things I needed to learn about those key players. Understand why things happened the way they did. There's always a learning curve. You can't talk about the issue until you dig in and understand it. That is where the humility comes in, so there is always going to learning of some kind.

SCAtoZ talked about feeling like she was learning a different language when reading

legislation:

> The language of legislation has been a learning process and my lobbyist has been
>
> most helpful to me in that… I did have to learn all types of writing are different.
>
> Legal writing is different than novel writing and legislative writing is different
>
> and understanding terminology and how that's used.  Sometimes it's clear as mud
>
> to read through policy stuff and the change.

While it is important to be knowledgeable, participants indicated it would be

impossible to predict everything a legislator might ask.  Amanda stated, "If they start

asking me questions about policies and things that I don't know, or thoughts about what

they might ask us.  And we're afraid of that.  I don't know enough information."

SCAtoZ described her feelings at the beginning of her advocacy journey:

> When I first started this, I had no idea what I was doing.  I just felt like I was
>
> faking it all the time.  I still feel that sometimes.  I'm going to have no idea what
>
> I'm doing and you have to be able to think on your feet.  You have to be able to
>
> respond to a question, "That's a great question.  Let me take your email and I'll
>
> get back to you.  I don't know that data point but I'd be happy to find out for
>
> you," and just be confident that way.

Understanding legislative processes helps to accomplish goals.  According to

participants, the emphasis on knowing what their 'ask' is going to be is paramount. Etta

James shared the importance of school counselors keeping in mind all of the other players

when legislative education budgets are being considered:

That's why school counselors tend to be better leaders and maybe classroom instructional specialists or classroom teachers, because we actually see the whole school. You see the whole child. You see the whole system if you're doing that advocacy work. If you're not doing the advocacy work, I don't think you understand because you're not listening to all of the conversations about, "Well, here's the pot of money and here's all the people that are trying to get that money. So tell me why I need to give it to school counselors versus nurses or the tech teams?" It's allowed me to have a more global perspective on education as a whole and how to specifically hone in on the strengths of school counselors to try to dive into that and not be generic in my ask.

SCAtoZ talked about having to learn to communicate with legislators when there is a request:

Education speak isn't their legislative speak and that's different. I've had to learn how to turn my education speak into legislative speak and how to word things in ways that are meaningful to them… You have to provide it in a palatable form in something that's digestible. Learning how to do that effectively, and it matters how a page looks, and using graphics matters and using charts matters.

Amanda echoed the sentiment of having specific materials for the legislators benefit and her own when making requests of legislators:

I think when state organizations go in, we need to know what our ask is. I provide a one pager or a white paper or something like that, that has the talking points for them and me, particularly when it is something super legislative-y. For

example, a particular policy that we want them to push through. When I've got

the talking points, then I can connect it back to experience.

SCAtoZ discussed doing research to know the background of the legislators you are

speaking with:

You need to know your audience and who you are speaking to. Are you speaking

to a legislator from a rural area? Are you speaking to someone from a big city?

You need to know that they want to know how things affect their constituents

because that's who votes for them, right?

Many of the participants talked about the length of time it can take for legislative

bills to be written, proposed, discussed and then brought up for a vote. The time tables

can create challenges whether on the short or long side. Emily stated, "I have to keep

teaching about advocacy because it does work. Sometimes it takes a session and

sometimes it takes ten years. That's sometimes just the way it goes." Rachel shared this

sentiment:

You have to be two steps ahead or you can miss it and sometimes you get it, but

other times you're blindsided by things that come out. The ability to move slow,

but then also be able to move fast when you need to. There are systems where

you have some things in place that if you need to act quickly, you can act quickly.

Emma explained that often, advocacy work takes years of dedication and can sometimes

even need to be passed to other school counseling advocates:

There's never an end point with advocacy. Learning and knowing that what you

do is building for tomorrow, you have to have that mindset. You can't go in

thinking that it's just this sheer result and, it's just done, right? … It's so long.

You have to go in thinking, I'm trying to build things for the future. I'm laying down a foundation. If I'm doing nothing else, I'm laying down a foundation.

Emily referenced that learning is an ongoing and evolving process when it comes to legislative advocacy work. The more one gets involved with advocacy initiatives, the more learning is required:

It goes back to the learning curve piece. Every time you move out a level, there's another learning curve that has to happen. There's another layer of players that you have to understand. There's another layer of sort of truth and even unspoken politics that you have to understand. Just being able to understand those different levels and I could have impact at those different levels was critical.

The school counseling leaders in this study underwent a learning process in regards to legislative knowledge that was required to be a successful advocate for school counseling. They had to learn to navigate through legislative language, processes and timelines. Not only did participants describe this learning process, they described the process of learning to have confidence in themselves as leaders and advocates.

**Confidence Building**

As school counseling leaders grow and build self-efficacy, they receive support from mentors, experience benefits from engaging in leadership activities, and gain confidence in their ability to lead others, take risks, and share a vision with others (Gibson, Dollarhide, Moss, Aras, Mitchell, 2018). Participants in this study described similar advantages resulting from their engagement in public arena advocacy and growth as advocate leaders.

Many of the participants described experiences where they were approached by other leaders in their state who recognized leadership potential in them. For Josue, it started when a mentor in his state contacted him and asked him to engage in leadership in his state counseling organization:

At first, I was a little apprehensive, because you think, "Well, what I'm doing at the local level might not transmit to a more regional or statewide level and now I'm really focused on this one area. It's a lot and do I really want to do this? Do I believe in it being good for kids? Yes, because that's what I take it all back to… She knew that that was going to be the draw for me. "Imagine what you are doing right now for one district. If you take that passion and drive and apply it to the state, what you could do for kids and counselors," and she said, "Sit on it." I did, and I didn't have any other answer at that point. I didn't have any way to wiggle out at that point because she knew where to get me and that's where it was, and here I am."

Emily stated:

I had someone approach me and suggest that I start getting involved in our state association and this person was the chair of the government relations committee at the same time, and I'm sure I looked at her like she had three heads. I didn't see myself as being, my first initial thought was, I'm not a political person.

Amanda talked about how other's encouragement inspired her to get involved and stay involved because she showed that she could be an advocate:

People told me I was good at it. I felt good about it. I continued to hone in on my craft. With anybody learning an instrument or anybody that's a good teacher, you

might think, "I don't know. I'm just okay." Then, when people start to boost your

ego or build that confidence for you, it makes you want to continue to do better

and be better when you see results.

Emma's experience was similar to this:

It's hard to know if you feel like you can give more and I think you have to dip

your toe in to see that there are levels and you can become comfortable with this.

This can actually enrich what you're doing. And I do think too, somebody saying

that they believe in you is huge. Somebody saying, "You would be good for this.

I see this in you." It really is huge.

Despite receiving encouragement and reassurance from a mentor or leader, many

of the participants described a fear or hesitancy before getting involved at the public

arena level. Freeman shared, "There was some reluctance and some hesitation and for

me, I'm big on doing what makes sense and what feels right. I think that connection

between your head and your heart is super important." Emma described the fear as:

It's just fear of the unknown because you don't have the experience with it and

you build up in your mind what it's going to be like to talk to people, that you're

not going to say the right thing. That you're not going to know what to say at all.

You also fear that you're not going to have the time to get everything done.

Emily used the metaphor of a diving board:

Thinking about jumping off a diving board, especially for the first time. You're

just scared to death. There's no way you can do this. For me, a big part of

advocacy competencies was thinking bigger. Just thinking beyond what my sort

of imaginary boundaries were and thinking bigger impact or types of action I could take or in terms of outcomes that I could aim for. I was thinking bigger.

Etta James described it as a stretching of how she sees herself by saying, "I'm one of those people that sits in the back of the room and observes and sees how people are and then once I kind of see different personalities and I try to play off of those." Jessie also described a stretching when she stated, "I don't think I'm confident with it. But you just do what needs to be done. Say what needs to be said because it is going to make a difference. Now, if you believe in what you're going to talk about, that's where the appearance of confidence comes from." Jim also described pushing through discomfort:

> I think it's pretty common for us to feel uncomfortable talking in front of people, in general, but I think sometimes its intimidating to think these are elected officials for our state. You're the expert in the room. You know about school counseling, about students, about how school runs and how it works, and what your role is. And I think that through the years, sometimes very consciously, but other times it just, that sort of resonates with me and the fact that they might know about their constituents. They might know all kinds of stuff like that, but they don't know what I know about kids. They don't know what I know about working with kids and the struggles that they have. I think that is what gave me the fortitude to be able to push forward with it because, they might know a lot of things. But, guess what? I know a lot of things too.

Elected officials are typically highly regarded individuals with high profile jobs and responsibilities. Participants described being afraid of speaking with legislators due to a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes in front of important people.

However, Emma describes a lessening of the fear when she stated, "I do think a lot of it is just making those connections and feeling more confident once you start to actually discover that the legislators are just people. That's part of it. Just to get over that."

Rachel described experiencing an increase in confidence when her perspective changed:

I think, like any human being, that fear of the unknown. Fear of doing something you've never done before. Seeing some of these elected officials as being bigger than they are and not realizing they are human beings. They are human beings that are elected officials that had everyday jobs and decided that they had a calling into an elected office. Once you make that human connection and that relationship, you realize, they're just human beings that have a position of power.

Tim echoed this sentiment:

The biggest thing for me was just realizing that these people, who have chosen politics as their life are just people. They're not gods. They're really not. They're important in their line of work, but outside of their line of work, they're just people. They're just other human beings that have a role and they're just as approachable as anybody else.

Emily described her fear as resulting from:

I think I always believed that there was some kind of level of polish and I don't know where that came from. Maybe that comes from the media or something, but much of the advocacy that I would engage in was often one-on-one conversations. If I could be real and I could get the other person to relax and be real and authentic too, then I could do the work and I didn't need to be some tv version of myself in order to come across as knowledgeable or passionate or well-intended

or involved or engaged or any of those things. I could just be my normal version of myself.

Participants talked about what helped them build their confidence. SCAtoZ said that for her, "It comes from faking it till I make it for a long time." She described her confidence as something that grew with more experience. Amanda offered that feelings of efficacy grew just by knowing her own work, "99% of the time, you will know how to answer those questions because they are asking you questions about what you do in your job every day." Emily shared a realization that helped her build confidence:

I learned the confidence piece was knowing that I didn't have to have a particular way of speaking. In the beginning I thought that I needed to be this really eloquent, perfect, orator like Barack Obama. He seems like he never stumbles with his words, so understanding that wasn't a requirement was an important part of building my confidence. I could just talk the way I normally talk and I could be convincing with the stories that I had to share, with the points I felt I needed to make. I didn't have to alter myself to be in that place. I didn't have to fit some kind of role.

The participants shared that after they had gotten some experience advocating at this level, they were rewarded with feelings of validation which helped to continue to build their confidence and their sense of having a voice. Josue shared that, "It validated for me that I had a voice in school counseling. Even though it was at the local level, I knew that what I was doing was right for kids. I knew what I was doing was right for counselors and that my voice could make a difference." Participants talked about getting invited to participate in specific legislative or policy driving actions. Bryan specifically

mentioned, "I was invited to be part of the state return to school task force and that was a big deal. There were 45 people on the committee. I was one of them." Emma reiterated this point when she shared, "He asked me to be on the transition mental health panel. This was powerful because there was no other counselor of any kind on that panel. It was nice to have a school counselor there to be able to drive some of the policy they were looking to effect." SCAtoZ also spoke about the affirmation of being asked to participate in official proceedings:

> Anytime I testified before a subcommittee, it just feels like such an honor to be able to do that and be listened to and fight for what could make incredible changes for school counselors in Virginia and support their programs.

SCAtoZ spoke to the importance of school counselor voices being heard by legislators in order for these legislators and policy makers to hear first-hand about the job of the school counselor considering they often do not have reliable information:

> Being able to advocate at such a top level where decisions are being made without any information available, as really is the case in most education to be honest, about what it's like to have boots on the ground and how those decisions will play out is affirming. They're asking people at top levels in the DOE, who are in glass towers, who don't know how things play out on the ground. So to be able to be a school counselor in a school… We were able to use that to create a huge movement. School counselors being able to have a voice and exercising that voice at that policy level, which is where systemic change is really made.

Many of these school counseling leaders shared experiences related to building their sense of confidence and self-efficacy. They endured feelings of hesitation and fear

regarding their abilities, yet, often with encouragement from others and positive experiences, they were able to foster the confidence needed to exist in the public arena. Many participants shared feelings of validation when positive changes were made and their excitement at being invited to the proverbial table for involvement with policy or legislative activities.

**Balancing Roles**

Participants shared that they have to work to balance all of the roles they play in their personal and professional lives.  The role of school counselor, the role of school counseling advocate, family responsibilities, and whatever other roles they play in their personal lives had to be intentionally negotiated.  School counselors already have multiple responsibilities within their school buildings and very full schedules.  Adding in public arena advocacy work can be a cumbersome addition to their responsibilities. Emma stated, "I think people don't always know how to gauge their time because they feel busy. School counselors feel busy all the time anyway, right?"  Amanda mused about how some school counselors feel about adding responsibilities:

> "It's too hard. I can't do it. I don't have time."  I think that what's hard too is you have to put in double time for a while and I get that.  That's really hard for people to work all day, putting out fires and then spend their evening trying to figure out why the fire started in the first place and to stop it when you put out fires all day, the last thing you want to do is think about it more when you get home.  But if you want to change your role and you want to get to an ideal state where you're really able to impact every building, you might have to do that.  You might have to play the game during the day and strategize at night.

Family responsibilities often interfere with being available through the evening hours, as SCAtoZ explained, "When legislative action items come up, it's a really fast timeline. So I found that really challenging, balancing as a mom." Rachel also shared how she had to call in family supports to be able to fulfill her role on the government relations committee at times when she needed to get to the capital building but had to coordinate childcare as well. Emily experienced unique challenges with multiple roles that she felt able to tie together because of a common end goal:

> It was late nights. It was endless phone calls. It was suddenly shifting your schedule to try to be on some phone call or get downtown for a meeting. It was important work and it was work I enjoyed, but I was tired… I was trying to have a job as a school counselor, work on my PhD and do all that. Do all three things and it was a lot to manage, but I also think that I felt like it all tied together. I was working on one big project that had different angles and I would switch those angles up depending upon what time of day it was and what setting I was in. So that feeling of being connected and not compartmentalized so much, that was an important factor in it too.

Josue reflected on how he was able to create boundaries between his roles and responsibilities despite the demands:

> You don't sleep and let's be honest, when I'm in the school building and when it's time for school, it's time for school. I developed even back then, even though I knew we were fighting for our identity and who we are as a profession, when it was school time, a hundred percent of my focus was on my job… so whatever my job was at the moment and even now, whatever my job is at the moment, that's

where a hundred percent of my attention is focused.  That's the only way that I'm

able to do it because nothing would get done with any sort of quality if I was

splitting my time during my day between this and my state organization and

everything else.

Participants found that sometimes they had to delineate between their role as

employee for a school district and their role as an advocate for school counseling.  Emma

shared that, "Sometimes it was frustrating because you want to advocate for your

organization, but you're employed by this other organization.  Sometimes it seemed like

they were at odds a little bit."  SCAtoZ had a similar experience, "I can say where I'm a

school counselor, but, my beliefs and what I'm advocating for is not (her local school

district's).  It's for the Virginia School Counselor Association.  So making it very clear

and sure that I'm wearing the proper hat at the proper time."  Jessie talked about

separating herself out of the role of advocate when she is aiming for change:

> I think it's really important not to confuse the greater good with your own
>
> agendas.  For me, I have to always remind myself when I'm going into meetings
>
> and testifying and doing whatever I'm going to do, is this about the greater good
>
> or is this what 'Jessie' wants?

Rachel dug further into separating her role from her political views when it comes to

engaging in conversation or presenting to legislators:

> We talk about our do's and don'ts before we go into legislative meetings as a
>
> group, very much being bi-partisan.  Depending on what your own personal
>
> political views are and what your legislator's political views are, you need to take
>
> that out of the equation.  I think it's having to know the roles.  If you're going as

something that is being sponsored by your state association, very much you need

to be a neutral party advocating for kids and school counselors.

As these school counseling leaders got more and more involved in public arena

advocacy work, they experienced the need to balance the roles they play. These roles

include school counselor, advocate, community member, in addition to any family roles

they play. This meant they had to find ways to manage their time as well as be mindful

of their 'employee' role and advocate role in order to be authentic and use their voice for

school counselors.

**Building and Maintaining Relationships**

Frequently, participants discussed the importance of building relationships with

the stakeholders they were advocating to for school counseling. Emily stated simply, "I

fundamentally believe that change happens because of relationships. I think that's true in

everything, but especially advocacy. If you don't have a relationship with someone,

they're not going to hear you out." Josue explained it as a connection:

> What it boils down to is connection, making sure that you are human. Making
>
> sure that you are somebody who is passionate and articulate and somebody that is
>
> trustworthy and people know that at the end of the day, you have their best
>
> interests at heart. Ultimately, I think as an advocate for students and as an
>
> advocate for school counselors, that is the secret to my success.

Emma finds encouragement to keep going from connections that she has created:

> What I've learned from them and those moments are really about connection.
>
> Establishing a connection that leads to change. That's why it's meaningful to me
>
> to show that connections with people are powerful. There's lots of ways that you

can establish and build on that.  It really does drive change.  If I didn't see anything happening from it, I don't think it would be as powerful for me, but I think, whether it's in big or small ways, I've been able to bear witness to it.

Skills that participants said they used to build relationships with legislators and other stakeholders often centered around listening.  Emma reflected, "The active listening more than anything else.  Whether it's the people that you're working with alongside you or when you're going to talk to legislators and you want to hear the thoughts that are coming up for them.  Really trying to be able to respond in the moment.  Genuinely."

School counselors are trained in interpersonal skills in their graduate programs.  Many of the participants reasoned that these counseling skills are critical in public arena advocacy work.  Josue asserted:

> You need to listen more than you speak.  Then once you've gotten around to all stakeholders that are involved in the collaborative process, you need to be able to summarize what the story is, the needs are and the solutions, when to collectively brainstorm as the solutions to the issue as counselors. That's what we do, right? We echo it.  We pair it.  We reframe or rephrase.  It's all of the skill sets that we are taught as counselors that we use as collaboration, negotiating skills.  We are not taught how to advocate, but the skills we are taught to use to work with students are exactly the skills that we need to be effective collaborators and advocates for our profession.

Freeman emphasized basic communication skills:

> Self-awareness helps me figure out what questions to ask.  The collaboration piece helps me figure out who I need to ask.  Then the critical thinking and

emotional regulation and social awareness, helps to figure out how to frame the

questions. It's been the social emotional skills really, just to put a bow on it.

Bryan stressed that:

> You have to understand and know when to back off and know when to push and
>
> you know, that doesn't happen because I'm a jerk. So, if you go in guns a blazing,
>
> you're going to piss people off and then you're not going to be around to fight the
>
> fight the next day. It really does require those skills, especially in terms of high
>
> level advocacy.

Many of the participants pointed out specifics about having relationships with

legislators, such as being strategic, stroking their egos a bit, and managing your own

disappointment when you are intentionally trying to build a relationship with a specific

legislator. Emily commented on knowing how to affirm legislators through listening:

> The relationship piece, I think is vital to any kind of advocacy work and then the
>
> big part of that relationship building is the listening piece. Especially when you
>
> are working with politicians. They're kind of like professors and they like to talk
>
> a lot. You have to be willing to hear them and to affirm the things they're saying
>
> or agree with them, you know, the reflecting back skill.

SCAtoZ spoke to the strategic thinking and ego stroking that sometimes seems necessary

building relationships with legislators:

> The biggest one is how you say things, being very complementary and the ego
>
> stroking. I just had no idea how complimentary, which is not necessarily my
>
> strong suit, but even if they completely screwed you over, you have to say,

"Thank you so much for your work on this. I'm so grateful for all you've done."

It's very petty and it was hard for me to do that.

Tim echoed this when he said, "You have to be stroking the ego a little bit of the legislators. Just slightly, not overbearing, you know, we are still counselors." Emma shared her frustration with, "even if somebody has said something horrible and makes horrible bills and everything, you still have to talk to that person. You have to find it in yourself to see what's going to make a difference for them and move the dial for that."

Jessie shared a unique relationship that she developed with a legislator who appreciated her honesty though:

He just looked at me and said, "Do you know what I like about you?" I thought, oh no. And he said, "You're honest and you say what needs to be said. It's not political, you don't hide behind anything. If it needs to be said, you say it. That's so refreshing to me. I like that, so just keep doing that." Well, you know with the work at the capital, you can't always say what needs to be said. Sometimes we spend a lot of time dancing around what needs to be said. But I always I fall back on telling my truth.

Emily described how the relationships built with legislators are intentional and with a purpose in mind:

I had to put time into that relationship and I think that the other component of it is, you are trying to get something out of this relationship… There's always the element of, we're trying to support one another. I'm trying to keep you in office and you're trying to help me with issues that I'm concerned about. It's got an edge to it in that way.

These school counseling leaders spoke at great length regarding their experiences building and maintaining relationships in public arena advocacy work. They leaned on their counseling skills and emphasized listening to understand as primary strategies in connecting with stakeholders. Through these intentional relationships, they were able to create change for students.

**Working Collectively**

Participants shared a sense of being part of a larger collective group of school counselors, whether this was participating in the state school counselor association or being a part of a larger nationwide network of school counseling leaders. They shared a relief at finding a sense of belonging in this larger group of school counselors dedicated to change and furthering the profession. Being a part of this collective work, gave the participants a sense of purpose and a place to learn critical skills.

For many of the participants, getting connected with school counseling mentors encouraged increased involvement and assumption of leadership positions. When talking about one of her mentors Emily stated:

> She asked me and I wasn't sure of it, but I went ahead and accepted. She was
> great because she pulled me into meetings that I didn't necessarily have to attend
> on the state level… She was someone whom I had a lot of respect for. She was
> more of a seasoned counselor, a mentor, a role model for me and so I thought,
> well, if she thinks I can do this, then I must be able to make some kind of
> contribution.

Jessie shared this about one of her mentors:

> We formed a very quick relationship and he was giving a lot of different perspectives about the process and what I could be doing and should be doing and the land mines to avoid. I would never have made it through that process of successfully getting that bill all the way through both houses without those people.

Josue expressed gratefulness for one of his mentors who continues to be a positive force in the California Association for School Counselors:

> She knows all the ins and outs, but she doesn't just keep that. She uses her wealth of knowledge and experience to train all of us as the next generation up and coming to make sure that when she is ready to let go, this organization continues moving forward.

Jim shared appreciation for one of his mentors and her ability to create meaningful relationships:

> She was just really good about talking about it and saying, there are these things that are important and we need to get involved. You need to be at the Capitol. It was not like a command, but more of a, you need to come. You need to witness this, you need to experience it, and that type of thing. I think her approach was pretty relational and it kind of brought me in which I think she probably saw that as how I am and so it was really easy for me to get connected that way.

After getting involved the participants found that continued success in advocacy work comes from being a part of a larger group. Emily asserted:

> I think if I had been trying to do it by myself, it would not have worked. It would have never happened. I was constantly motivated and empowered by the fact that

this was collective work… I think if I had ever felt like I was doing it alone, I

don't think I would have been as motivated, but knowing that it was collective

work made it really meaningful.

Jim mentioned an elevation of self-efficacy and potential that results from being

surrounded by like-minded people who are supportive and successful:

It's just the experience of getting involved with your school and your district and

with your different associations, state and national, and becoming comfortable

because you're with great people and just making the realization that I can be

great too, because I'm with these people.

Participants shared that once they got involved, they felt like they were included

in a group of school counselors from whom they could learn a lot. Tim remarked on

being somewhat awe struck by some of these people, "Just seeing this group of

counselors from across the state and seeing a list of people who've been in leadership

roles in the past, everybody that I met on the board, they were like counseling rock stars,

I guess." Josue had a similar experience and explained that, "You start to get tangled up

in this web of school counseling Jedi almost. Once it takes off, you realize how small of

a community, as big as we are, how small of a leadership community we've got that

really drives school counseling for the nation."

Participants shared their experiences being part of a collective group of school

counselors that contribute to legislative/public arena advocacy for students and school

counseling. Mentorship that provided knowledge and connection was critical for them.

Contributing to the growth of larger groups of advocates that can also take on advocacy

work to function as a larger team helped avoid feelings of isolation and helped to share

the responsibilities. These participants also shared their feelings of appreciation and awe of other school counseling leaders who were doing great work and involving them in their efforts.

**Dealing with Resistance**

Participants described forces of resistance that both impeded and fueled their advocacy work. They described internal resistance coming from other school counselors who were not in agreement with the initiatives and external resistance from legislators and other stakeholders. Regardless of the source, participants described meeting the resistance and trying to maneuver around it. Jessie explained:

> Remember when you were little and you would take a running start and run face first into an impenetrable wall? A lot of people do that with advocacy. Sometimes you've got this wall of resistance there and you have to figure out, how am I going to go over it, under it, or around it. You have to be real strategic and get on the other side of that wall or get that wall to move. Being strategic and persevering and not taking 'no'. This is who I am as a person and that really helps with advocacy.

Tim shared a story about figuring out that advocating to a specific legislator just wasn't going to work because of the way that she received his group. "There was just this one legislator. A group of us went and I just had to leave the office because there was no way I was going to say anything nice, or productive, because she just had a wall up the minute we walked in."

Many of the participants talked about how it can be difficult to work with legislators or stakeholders who have an antiquated perception of what school counselors do. Bryan explained that:

> People who make the decisions are typically older, who probably didn't have the benefit of the comprehensive developmental school counseling program. And so, they're like, "Counselor? Who is that? They told me I couldn't go to college. They told me I wouldn't get into wherever." You know, all the negative stories. We go to these people and say, "Can you do more for us?" or "Give us more money" or whatever. And they're like, my counselor was blah, blah, blah. And we're like, but it's different now.

Josue equated it to an online referral service:

> What I find is that people always come at me, whether it's a state legislator or county coordinator, and they share their experience with a school counselor and I think it's human nature. You don't go on 'Yelp' and share the ten great restaurants you went to. You go to Yelp, and share that one awful restaurant you went to, it's just who we are. So, it's working through to try and make sure that when you 'Yelp' 'school counselors', you don't have these negative reviews pop up.

Throughout the interviews, the participants would bring up challenges that they faced when other school counselors were resistant to the message that was trying to be shared. Emily stated:

> For me, the real challenge has always been where there is internal resistance. What I mean by that is when there is resistance from people who are in the same

position that you are in and they don't want to take it up, they don't want to take

up the issue… I think for me, I didn't expect you to not think the same way about

this job as I do… I made the mistake of often thinking, you'll be on board with

this because it's the best thing for students or it's the best thing for our profession.

But they wouldn't be on board with it and I would try to advocate the position to

this person who was from my own constituency that I thought, you know, we're

all fighting for the same thing.

Participants shared frustration resulting from other counselors not embracing and seeing the need for changes or advances in the profession. Bryan said, "But we're still in a place where there's lots of counselors who are still stuck in old ways and not following a model and not doing anything current in my viewpoint." Amanda experienced, "pushback on even the ratios sometimes and whether we call ourselves guidance counselors or school counselors. I think that's what makes it tough, when our own folks are against some of the things that we're trying to move forward with our profession." Josue emphasized:

Sometimes you look at your colleagues when you're over here fighting tooth and

nail and then you hear it from somebody and they're standing in front of you and

you're saying, "Wait a minute. You're unraveling everything that we've done

collectively as a profession with that one statement or that one action." But it

goes back to, okay, now I've got to work to win you over and have you

understand the importance of what we do and why we say it.

Jessie echoed the sentiment of having to work with your own people to be able to accomplish positive changes:

There were people on the various boards, and I've been on a lot of boards, who didn't want to do anything to make the Department of Education (DOE) mad. Well, tell me, what does that look like, when the DOE gets mad? Tell me, and then we'll figure it out. But it was fear and I had to understand that. I knew I had to bring some people along getting a little more progressive and aggressive with creating legislative priorities and then going after them.

Participants often talked about the idea of not giving up and not giving in to any resistance. Emily maintained:

We have advocacy because we have resistance and we have differences of opinion on topics, so there's always going to be external resistance… You just keep going. You don't allow yourself to get derailed by it and you learn to expect it, but don't let it pull you off track, you just stay on track.

Bryan made it very clear:

You can't give up. Clearly you've got to stay focused and positive because if you do give up, then you're dead in the water, so nothing will change. So, it's not getting disappointed when something doesn't work. It's coming up with new ideas, coming up with new strategies.

The school counseling leaders in this study expressed frustration with their experiences facing resistance. This resistance sometimes came internally, from other school counselors. Other times, the resistance was external, from legislators and other stakeholders. Despite any resistance, the participants were firm in their unbending commitment to not giving up.

**Using your Voice for Change**

When talking about why these participants find legislative and public arena advocacy so important, they often spoke with emotion about their dedication to children and the field of school counseling. They are making a choice to step in and use their voice, leveraging any privilege they have for the benefit of students because they are passionate about making systemic changes. Emily shared:

> I don't know if it's a skill so much as it is a personal commitment to change. It's opting IN for change, rather than opting OUT. There are times when you have to decide what you're going to opt in for and what you're opting out of. You have to make those choices because you can't opt in for everything in education because you would burn yourself out quickly… It was realizing that the lack of acting, if I chose to opt out, that was more damaging than the potential, maybe, might happen good that could come out of opting in. I can't say what's going to happen if I opt in. I can't predict that. I can't really have a hand in that. I have to just cross my fingers and hope. For me, it's a better state of mind to be in where I can be hopeful, than it is to opt out and potentially really create some damage.

Etta James equated the felt responsibility to respond to current social justice issues to a recent popular musical:

> "Hamilton" is my all-time favorite thing that has changed my life. What is on repeat is 'history has its eyes on you'. I keep saying history has its eyes on us. If we don't get this right, right now. If we don't do something about it and we don't change and we don't make the progress that we have to make, shame on us, because we know how. I think Maya Angelou said this, "Do your best with what

you know, and then when you know better, do better." Yes, that's where we're at right now.

Many times, participants would express a driving force behind the public arena advocacy they engage in for their students and school counseling. Sometimes it came from a love of the job and sometimes it was because of a sense of fulfillment that they received. When SCAtoZ had to take time off of work for family issues, she realized how much she missed the work of being a school counselor and how much advocating for the profession meant to her:

> Like I said before, it is my heart work. It's the work of my heart. I didn't know how instrumental it is to who I am. That's not just school counseling. It's counseling and working with kids in general. It is my passion project. It is what I'm all about. So I had to have that experience to really learn that and know that, I literally do not find overall life happiness without it. It is a key point of my balance. It's a key point of my wheel to be able to have that and to feel at peace.

With her years' of experience, Amanda realized that:

> I understand not everybody has the fire, right? It's a job for some people. They don't live and breathe it. I say it's an illness for me sometimes because it's so much a part of my life. But I have seen the impact that a high quality school counselor and a high quality school counseling program can have on students, particularly our marginalized students. That's what fuels my passion and I know if I don't talk to my school board, they're never going to know.

Thinking about longevity of the dedication and long term effects, Josue took it to an even deeper place:

I want to be able to, on my deathbed, look back and say that I did what mattered.

Not for me, but for the world that I'm now leaving and knowing that even if one

additional school counselor is hired and a pocket of kids now have better services

because of that, it's that pebble in the pond theory. I just want to be a small

pebble and see those ripples happen and know that when I close my eyes for the

last time, my life made a difference.

Most of the participants at some point in the interviews referenced the importance

of stepping up and leveraging their privileged identities for the benefit of others.

Freeman emphasized, "You have to be able to bring attention to important issues, but you

also have to be able to fight on behalf of people who may not be there or may not have

the power to fight for themselves." Bryan added, "I can't change the fact of who I am

and the privilege that I've had but I can hopefully make it better for others." SCAtoZ

committed, "When they want me to stand in their stead and advocate for them, I can use

my privilege for that. And when they want to do that themselves, I can be there

supporting them in every way, right up until the moment that they do it. I feel like it's

my job and that's all of our jobs. If we're not here to do that, then we need to take a

seat."

Each of the participants emphasized that all of the time, effort and work that goes

into their public arena advocacy is for the benefit of their students, the benefit of children.

Bryan mused that, "I guess at some point I was indoctrinated to realize if we don't make

things different, then nothing's going to change. If we're happy with the status quo, then

that's fine. But the status quo isn't helping all students." Amanda talked about the

importance of advocating for the profession of school counseling in order to benefit kids:

It's helping people understand the impact that we have on students and for school

counselors. We will advocate until we're blue in the face for a kid, but when it's

time to advocate for ourselves, we don't make the connection about how

advocating for ourselves IS advocating for that kid. It's an equity thing. It is and

oftentimes the fine line that I walk with people that aren't school counselors in my

advocacy is you're trying to save jobs. It's about your job. I get very focused on

the school counselor role and protecting that, but it's not about protecting

somebody's job or their role. It's bigger than that. It's about the impact that

program has on a kid.

Jessie expressed strong feelings about school counselors maintaining their focus on what

is going to benefit students:

The other piece of that is the reflection piece for the school counselor who is

shying away from social justice, from equity and access. Do they have the true

mindset to be a school counselor? If that's not part of their DNA, then they need

to be selling dresses at Macy's or something. If that's of no interest to the school

counselor, or if their fear outweighs the risks, they need to take to ensure that all

their students are treated with respect and dignity and that they all have equal

access. I mean, if they're not willing to do that, what do we have?

Tim finds inspiration and strength from knowing he is helping students:

Part of it is, if I don't, who will? I don't necessarily want to wait for others to do

what I can see needs to be done. I drank the Kool-Aid. I'm sold. The work we

do is vital to the success of every student that we interact with. I put my

discomfort aside because ultimately what I am doing is just to benefit our

students, even though it takes funky ways sometimes. But, you have to get the adults on board before you can help the students. Just making sure that you're keeping the student in mind. Everything that I do, I try to frame it with 'will this ultimately benefit students' and I just hold my nose and go in.

With all of the public arena advocacy work that school counselors do for students and the profession, SCAtoZ believes:

We just have to benevolent manipulators. You have to turn people through kindness and advocacy. At the end of the day, if you look in the mirror and say, today I did what's best for kids, you will always be right. You will always be on the right side if that's what you can do. That's always my mantra when I advocate, when I'm talking, when I'm doing legislative things. Our school counselor association is about school counselors, not about students. But school counselors are all about students. So at the end of the day, if I'm doing what's best for kids, then I'm doing my job.

The school counseling leaders in this study believe firmly in the need to be working towards greater benefit for students and using their voices for positive change in children's lives. Each of the participants expressed an understanding of the importance of taking risks and stepping up to advocate and do so willingly with dedication and passion for doing the right things for kids.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter provided detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of 12 school counseling leaders who have experience advocating at the legislative/public arena level. This study was guided by the research question: What are the experiences of school

counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level? Meaningful statements and quotes were pulled from the participants' comments in the individual semi-structured interviews and clustered together based on similarities. Seven recurring themes emerged from the data. The first theme, understanding the legislative learning curve, described how school counseling leaders had to gain a vast amount of legislative knowledge in order to be successful in public arena advocacy work. The second theme, building confidence, detailed what participants experienced as they grew more confident and build self-efficacy for advocacy work. The third theme, balancing roles, explained the challenges school counseling leaders experienced while trying to juggle the multiple roles they play. The fourth theme, building and maintaining relationships, described how advocates relied on their listening and counseling skills to create meaningful relationships with stakeholders. The fifth theme, working collectively, depicts how the participants discovered that they were a part of a large community of school counselors that support one another. The sixth theme, dealing with resistance, describes the frustration that the participants experienced as they were met with resistance from both internal and external sources. The last theme, using your voice for change, highlights the motivation and drive they experience knowing that what they are choosing to stand up for will benefit students on a broader scale. The following chapter includes a discussion of the results of this study in addition to an explanation of implications for the field of school counseling and recommendations for future research.

# CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the essence of the lived experiences of school counseling leaders who have been active in public arena advocacy for students and school counseling services. Specifically, the research question guiding this study was, "What are the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level?" The lived experiences of 12 school counseling leaders were captured through 'Zoom' interviews, categorized into cluster groupings, and then further distilled into seven emergent meaning units or themes. This examination illuminated a dynamic growth experience that described what it is like for school counseling leaders who serve as advocates working towards systemic change for students.

A review of the literature helped to frame the research question. Throughout the history of the profession, legislation affected school counseling and therefore students' academic environments (Gysbers & Henderson, 2011). School counselors often serve as leaders in their schools and communities with knowledge and stakeholder relationships that potentially position them as powerful advocates for systemic change. Social justice advocacy has been positioned as a moral imperative for counselors (Lee, 2007; Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013), yet, school counselors who engage in advocacy at the public arena level face multiple barriers. Many others are reluctant to become active in

advocacy because of fear and a lack of understanding about what it means to advocate at the legislative/public arena level.

Through the use of phenomenological data analysis, quotes were used to make meaning of the participant's experiences. Seven themes emerged from the quotes: (a) understanding the legislative learning curve, (b) building confidence, (c) balancing roles, (d) building and maintaining relationships, (e) working collectively, (f) dealing with resistance, and (g) using your voice for change. This chapter intertwines the literature and the findings, discusses implications for the field of school counseling, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### Purpose of the study

The current study sought to investigate the experiences of school counselor leaders who advocate for students and the profession of school counseling at the legislative/public arena level. Through transcendental phenomenological reduction of the data and imaginative variation, the researcher aimed at, "deriving a structural description of the essences of the experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p.35). The focus of this research was to create rich textural and structured descriptions of these experiences so that other school counseling leaders may further the profession of school counseling and therefore create positive systemic change for students through public arena advocacy.

### Discussion of Research Findings

The word 'transcendental' in transcendental phenomenology indicates a reflection on things that are subjective and discovering the essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the data analysis process, I maintained an attitude of curiosity. I bracketed, or set aside, any biases or assumptions about this population and let the data

speak for itself. Through the phenomenological reduction and data analysis, descriptive themes emerged from the participants' reflections upon their lived experiences with public arena advocacy. The conceptual meaning of lived experiences in phenomenology answers the basic question, "What is this experience like?" (van Manen, 2017). Using a constructivist lens afforded my participants and me, the ability to make sense of the phenomenon of public arena advocacy and generate or construct a basic sense of meaning through interaction with others.

This study was analyzed through the use of Dollarhide's (2003) four framework model of school counselor leadership identity and Bandura's (1994) theory of social cognitive learning and self-efficacy. Dollarhide's four framework model, based on Bolman and Deal's (1997, 2008) model, states that there are four frames or lenses which are used by school counselors when engaging in leadership. These lenses are: (a) structural, which discusses school counselors building programs or contributing to organizations; (b) human resource, focusing on inspiring and empowering others; (c) political, referring to the ability to have interpersonal influence with stakeholders, questioning and accessing formal and informal power structures; and (d) symbolic, centering on the ability to communicate a strong vision, purpose, and meaning regarding school counseling programming. Bandura's (1994) theory of social cognitive learning and self-efficacy posited that higher self-efficacy is associated with a persistence to reach goals despite challenges and setbacks. Through dynamic interactions with others, individuals cultivate emotional and practical skills as well as an accurate self-perception with an understanding of the capabilities they can contribute to a group (Bandura, 1994). Each of my participants are centered in this research through the telling of their stories

and finding the similarities in the wholeness of their experiences.  This section provides

an interpretation of the findings through a thematic analysis and demonstrates how they

are connected to previous literature.

**Understanding the Legislative Learning Curve**

Participants in this study underwent a learning curve and a process of accepting

their own self-growth regarding legislative knowledge.  As Dillman-Taylor (2011)

suggested, these school counselors had to develop a connection between their school

counseling services and legislation or public policy, although literature available to

support them in this arena is almost non-existent (Chibbaro, 2006; Storlie, Hongryun,

Fink & Fowler, 2019).  Participants expressed feeling unprepared for a new world with

new social rules and an unknown language.  These school counselors had to acquire

knowledge regarding legislative policies and procedures, how to read legislation, and had

to gain critical information about legislators in order to feel competent advocating in this

realm which directly supports literature stating that advocacy at the legislative level is an

underdeveloped concept (Chibbaro, 2006; Crawford, Arnold, & Brown, 2014).

In order to prepare to make a request of a legislator for a new bill, specific

wording in proposed bills, and even budgetary allocations, participants discussed what it

took in preparing to 'make the ask'.  Participants described feeling trepidation presenting

and making 'an ask' of a legislator due to the realistic possibility that there would be

questions to which they did not know the answers.  They felt that the amount of

knowledge they needed to be prepared to recite was vast and broad.

It was important to research legislators' political agendas to know what might

appeal to them and therefore how to connect 'the ask' to their priorities.  Participants

described this as 'knowing your audience'. Designing written communication documents in bullet points or short digestible pieces was noted as helpful because their experience was that legislators did not have much time to spend on verbose documents. Knowing their audience and preparing specific written communication for legislators echoes Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon's (2010) advocacy strategies of using political savvy, initiating difficult dialogues, and marketing with data.

Participants described the need to be simultaneously prepared to be patient and act quickly regarding legislation as confusing and frustrating. Sometimes it takes less than a legislative session for a bill to be 'dropped' onto the House or Senate floor, voted on, and become law. However, it can also take years of hearing committee meetings, revisions, abandonment, getting re-written and revised again before a bill becomes a law. Participants talked about the frustration and challenge of galvanizing members to make swift calls regarding bills when things are moving quickly as well as the ability to stay the course with legislative counseling agendas that may take years to come to fruition. This echoes results found by Lee, Smith, and Henry (2013) who found that counselors have to utilize collaboration and cooperation with others to impact legislatures that can move slowly as well as shift focus suddenly.

This legislative learning curve that my co-researchers experienced reflects Cigrand, Havlik, Malott, and Jones's (2015) study, highlighting a gap in the literature concerning practices school counselors can employ in legislative advocacy for students and the profession. This gap of available knowledge and lack of resources restricts counselors' ability to prepare for advocacy work in the public arena. Thus, my participants felt ill prepared to function in the legislative arena when they began.

However, with the learning they experienced over time, they felt more adept at functioning as advocates and taking on politically minded identities.

**Building Confidence**

School counselors in this study described experiencing a process of building confidence in their abilities to serve as an advocate at the public arena level. Gibson, Dollarhide, Moss, Aras and Mitchell (2018) presented a model of counselor leadership that is mirrored by my participants' experiences. Their model states that three influential factors impact the growth of a leader: (a) influence, motivation, and support to lead, (b) an increase in leadership skills including an increased ability to share a vision and take risks while maintaining one's own wellness, and (c) reinforcing experiences. Each of my participants described these factors in their own leadership development process. For example, many of the participants were encouraged and supported by mentors, were able to lead advocacy initiatives, and felt validated when they were invited to contribute to decision making at a systemic level.

Many of the participants described a critical incident or situation that they recognized as something they needed to speak up about despite a general fear and lack of preparation. Both the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) and the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) require counselors to advocate for students and clients when systemic issues create barriers or obstacles to equitable growth and development. For both Josue and Etta James, it centered around district funding for school counselor positions that were jeopardized at the time. Freeman stepped up to advocate for racial equity in his school system. For both Jessie and Emily, their impetus to get involved in public arena advocacy was about equitable pay for school counselors across their state.

Participants indicated that despite having little confidence when they began, the possible benefits were worth the professional risk.

Each participant spoke about initially getting involved in their state's school counseling association. After this involvement or engagement, nearly all of them described being approached by an older or more seasoned counselor serving in some capacity on the leadership level in the school counselor association who recognized leadership potential in them. Most of the co-researchers reflected on this moment with pride and nostalgia. Being asked to become a part of the larger group was mentioned as exciting, humbling, and scary. Typically, the co-researchers described apprehension, fear and self-doubt as they began their advocacy work. However, personal contemplation about their abilities to build relationships through collaboration and encouragement from those that recognized their capabilities helped them to push through their discomfort. This is consistent with literature that highlights dimensions of school counselor leadership (Young & Bryan, 2018; Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013) such as interpersonal influence, resourceful problem solving, and professional efficacy giving counselors courage to challenge the status quo.

Surprisingly, the participants often described a reduction in their fear and apprehension after coming to an awareness that the legislators are also 'just regular human beings'. They described seeing the legislators as 'gods' or 'the elite' which made any prospective meeting with one all the more intimidating. However, when the participants were able to connect with them on a human level, confidence in their abilities increased exponentially. My co-researchers also expressed satisfaction and feelings of validation when they were invited to attend and present at legislative hearings or were

personally contacted by their representatives for thoughts on education related legislation.

This validates the literature suggesting that legislators and policy makers need input from

school counselors regarding legislation that will create the greatest benefits for students

(Rallis & Carey, 2017; Stevenson & Edvalson, 2017).  These experiences communicated

to them that they were finally at the table and being accepted as a voice for the profession

by stakeholders that needed to hear what they had to say.  The data in this study supports

research that states counselors build the confidence needed to lead advocacy initiatives,

overcome challenges, thus building support through their relationships with stakeholders

(Mullen, Newhart, Haskins, Shapiro, & Cassel, 2019).

**Balancing Roles**

School counselors fill and continually manage many roles in their professional

and personal spaces.  These roles may be work related, roles they play in organizations,

and often, family roles.  The school counseling leaders in this study mentioned an

intentional balancing of the roles in which they engage while serving as advocates for the

profession and students.  This is consistent with the literature on burn out and role

conflict for school counselors that encourages development of coping skills (Kim &

Lambie, 2018).  While school counselors have busy and demanding jobs, that does not

mean that they do not have responsibilities after school.  Participants with dependent

families described having to manage children's bed times and family schedules while

also making phone calls and writing emails regarding legislation after work hours.  With

these demands on their time, counselors had to find ways to manage the fatigue that came

with those loads, supporting research on perceived stress, coping skills and self-care for

school counselors that mitigates professional burnout (Fye, Cook, Baltrinic, & Baylin, 2020).

Counselors also had to navigate competing interests when they were advocating for their school counselor association while also being employed by a district that may not align with the association's agenda. This required a delicate balancing and extremely defined roles. One could not be advocating for a reduced student to school counselor ratio and claim to be from a school district when the school district was not in support of this initiative. These participants described having to be very clear that they were advocating on behalf of students through a school counseling association to avoid backlash within their district or their school. Participants supported previous research by acknowledging they ran the risk of suffering professional repercussions for their advocacy efforts, possibly risking their job any time they spoke up for students (Crawford, Arnold, & Brown, 2014).

Another aspect of balancing and defining roles came into play when counselors had to set aside their own personal desires for legislative agendas and focus on the legislative agendas of the school counselor associations or, as Jessie put it, "the greater good." When engaging in any political activity, one has to consider their own political standing. Participants described the challenge of putting their own political feelings aside and worked hard to remain neutral and bi-partisan to make systemic change for students. This supports literature that school counselors' personal political ideologies can interfere with legislative advocacy activities (Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011). This compartmentalization ultimately is how they kept the role of 'voice for school

counselors' at the very front of their awareness and intentionally served school counselors and students through that voice.

**Building and Maintaining Relationships**

Each of my participants stressed the importance of intentional relationship building in public arena advocacy.  The data in this study supports two key dimensions that exemplify school counselor leadership practices.  These dimensions are interpersonal influence emphasizing communication styles that encourage systemic collaboration, and school counselors' abilities to work with stakeholders to create systemic change for students (Young & Bryan, 2018).  Emily stated that, "change happens through relationship."  These counseling leaders expressed their firm belief that the connections they built with legislators and stakeholders are the avenue through which they are able to make systemic changes.  Many times, participants spoke about how they used active listening in order to truly understand the perspective of the legislators as well as to validate and ensure the legislator felt heard.  As both Tim and Etta James said, this was in some way an effort to give more attention to some of the legislators.  When the legislators felt that someone was truly paying attention to them, they seemed to reciprocate and value that relationship.

Despite the fact that CACREP Standards mandate that school counselors be prepared to advocate at all levels for student success (2009, 2016), none of the participants said that they were explicitly taught public arena advocacy skills in graduate programs.  Participants did however, emphasize that basic counseling skills learned in counselor training helped build and maintain relationships with stakeholders.  The ability to actively listen, reflect content and feelings, and summarize stories assisted participants

in understanding the legislators while building trust and rapport. Both Jessie and Amanda spoke specifically and frankly about the positive effects they have seen with legislators simply by being their authentic selves. These findings reflect abilities and practices that effective school counseling leaders embrace described by Young and Miller-Kneale (2013), some of which were: build partnerships and engage all stakeholders, navigate through the politics of systems, persuade colleagues and build consensus, and advocate with a courageous stance (p.30). Because legislation can take time, participants stressed the importance of building and maintaining these relationships over time. When the participants had positive long-standing relationships with legislators, these legislators would reach out to them for input on legislation and initiatives which helped secure the reciprocal relationship.

**Working Collectively**

While building relationships with legislators, participants described a sense of relief and belonging resulting from the discovery they were a part of a larger, yet tight-knit, community of passionate school counseling leaders who were willing to mentor emerging leaders. Emily reflected upon the 'collective work' as a source of inspiration and encouragement for her. Involvement and leadership within counseling organizations has shown to provide positive influence, motivation and support to lead, which reinforces experiences and ultimately increases leadership skills (Gibson, Dollarhide, Moss, Aras, & Mitchell, 2018). Participants described the comfort and fellowship that accompanied knowing they were not working alone, had a shared commitment to creating positive change, and finding encouragement in like-minded peers.

Considering the time commitment that public arena advocacy takes, participants talked about the importance of having at least a small team whom advocates can call upon when needed. Engaging in legislative activities may require someone to testify at a hearing with little advanced notice. If one advocate is unavailable, it is imperative to have a team of advocates that could be available to step in. This supports research by Lee, Smith, and Henry (2013) who noted the importance of counseling advocates having a network of other advocates with which to challenge the status quo in the sociopolitical world.

Mentors who were encouraging and insightful aided my participants' knowledge of what steps to take and how to avoid pitfalls when interacting with legislators and legislative processes. The participants' experiences with advocacy mentors is reflected in previous researchers' work highlighting the importance of positive mentors contributing to feelings of self-efficacy for school counselors (Milsom & Kayler, 2008; Milsom & McCormick, 2015). Similar to Bandura's (1994, 1997) suggestions about self-efficacy, these mentors contributed vicarious learning experiences, verbal persuasion and encouragement, and opportunities to achieve mastery as the participants learned how to serve as advocates. Additionally, participants stated that they felt as if they had become members of an elite club of school counseling 'Jedi' and 'rock stars', as Josue and Tim had coined them. These groups served as a synergistic and collective source of support for these school counseling leaders.

**Dealing with Resistance**

School counselors engaging in public arena advocacy often encounter resistance, thus mastering their own emotion management as they push past these barriers. As

Emily stated, "We have advocacy because we have resistance and we have differences of opinion on topics, so there's always going to be resistance." Participants faced interpersonal and professional challenges with both internal and external resistance.

The internal resistance came from school counselors who did not agree with initiatives aimed at furthering the profession or who simply avoided change. Surprisingly, participants described this as the more challenging and most troubling area of resistance. Participants described meeting resistance and pushback from other school counselors on multiple national initiatives. Some of the disagreements were concerning school counselor student ratios and some were regarding the importance of implementation of a comprehensive counseling program. This form of resistance was particularly difficult and deflating for the participants. They also found it surprising because they felt it created more work for them to convince their own people, other school counselors, to understand the benefits which then caused some division. These findings reflect the growing literature on school counselor role conflict and burnout. School counselors often negotiate role conflict in their school building with administrators (Ruiz, Peters, & Sawyer, 2018) and even between school counselors due to differences in training or even lack of clarity in their graduate programs (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Holman, Nelson, & Watts, 2019; Watkinson, Goodman-Scott, Martin, & Biles, 2017). Participants explained that many times the resistance came from veteran school counselors who didn't see the benefit of running a comprehensive program versus focusing on guidance or individual counseling. This resistance also came from counselors who did not have administrative or district support and were balancing

multiple non-counseling roles and duties and could not see any change or benefit coming from advocacy initiatives in their own school buildings.

External resistance from legislators or other powerful stakeholders also emerged from the discussions with participants. Sometimes legislators would not see the importance of school counseling services and other times, they just did not prioritize school counseling in annual budgets. Participants described dealing with disappointment when their advocacy efforts failed to yield positive results, yet also described their commitment to continuing and not giving in. This substantiates Bandura's (1994) social learning theories which explain how self-efficacy is built through mastery experiences while engaging with others enabling individuals to persist when setbacks and obstacles occur. Participants in this study described increasing confidence in their advocacy skills as they continued to seek out opportunities in which they were able to lead and advocate.

Strategic thinking was a consistent strategy that participants leaned on when facing resistance. Participants found that most resistance from legislators came from either a lack of understanding the roles and benefits of school counselors and comprehensive programming or the battle of prioritizing a limited education budget. As proposed by The Education Trust (EdTrust, 2011) and supported by previous research (Stevenson and Edvalson, 2017), legislators sometimes fail to see the connection between student college and career readiness and school counseling and respond favorably to school counseling advocacy when exposed to specific information and supportive data that make this connection clear.

Participants also faced resistance from legislators who had prior negative experiences with possibly their own school counselor or even their child's school

counselor. Many participants described how one negative interaction with a school counselor can lead to someone generalizing about all school counselors, creating resistance that is difficult to fight against. Josue equated it to a bad 'Yelp' review for school counselors. However, because these participants' self-efficacy and confidence continued to grow over time, they exhibited a strong commitment, motivation, resilience and perseverance aiding them in pushing through resistance and continued to strive for their goals (Bandura, 1994). These findings flow in to the next section, where participants spoke about using their voices to promote systemic change.

**Using Your Voice for Change**

The ASCA ethical standards for school counselors (2016) define an advocate as "a person who speaks, writes or acts to promote the well-being of students, parents/guardians and the school counseling profession" (p.9). Social justice advocacy, aiming to transform individuals, communities and institutions to be more equitable, is considered a key factor in school counselor leadership (Young & Bryan, 2015). The findings of this study support strategies identified by Singh, Urbano, Haston and McMahon (2010) utilized by social justice advocates: political savvy to navigate power structures, consciousness raising, initiating difficult dialogues, building intentional relationships, teaching self-advocacy skills, using data for marketing, and educating others about the role of the school counselor. Though these strategies emphasize school counselors working as social justice change agents in their school buildings on a client/student level, they also relate to public arena advocacy.

Participants shared using their proximity to power and voice to influence those in charge and described it as an ongoing process throughout their careers. Once they

identified an initial critical issue or motivating event that needed to be addressed, they began to see more issues to which they could lend their school counselor voice. These critical issues seemed to serve almost as silent calls to action for these counselors to drive change for the profession. Many of them described this work as something that they are passionate about since they want to make a positive difference in children's lives supporting research that suggests that counselors will seek distributive justice for all clients (Gonzalez, Fickling, Ong, Gray, & Waalkes, 2018).

Social justice advocacy is seen as a moral and ethical responsibility for counselors (Lee, 2007; Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013) and components of it are woven through the ASCA ethical standards for school counselors (2016). Participants in this study mentioned growing in their reflection, motivation, and courage because they knew what they were advocating for went back to making changes that are best for all students. This supports Dollarhide, Clevenger, Dogan, and Edward's (2016) study finding that counselors notice changes in themselves, while practicing constant self-reflection as they adopt and embody a social justice identity.

As these counselors continued to grow in their leader advocate identity, they developed a deeper appreciation for their proximity to those in power and began to recognize their own educational power and privilege. Along with this growth in their leader identity, came a greater amount of courage to take risks for students. Bemak and Chung (2008) explained the 'Nice Counselor Syndrome' that described many counselors' hesitancy at getting involved for fear of negative professional and personal consequences. Though the participants in this study mentioned their hesitancy at getting involved fearing these costs, their commitment to making positive changes for students

overpowered their desire to be liked and gave them the impetus to take greater risks for the benefit of children.

Emily explained that throughout her career, she has been presented with situations that she saw as opportunities to make a difference. She therefore has continued to choose to 'opt in for change' in hopes that she would make a positive impact. Etta James explained it as a 'passion project' for her and described it as a balancing force in her life. School counseling leaders experience public arena advocacy as a 'passion project' that they continually choose to opt in for with each advocacy initiative in which they become involved. This passion project allows school counseling advocates to be a part of something bigger; change for the profession, students and themselves.

## Conclusion of Findings

This study expanded the existing literature regarding school counselors and public arena advocacy. Specifically, the researcher explored the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level. School counseling leaders who engage in public arena advocacy take an active, macro-level approach and attempt to function as a change agent around issues plaguing large groups of students by collaborating with community stakeholders and elected officials. The essence of the school counseling leaders' experiences encompassed seven themes. As the conversations unfolded, school counseling leaders shared how their experiences helped shaped their advocacy journeys, related to themes of learning legislative processes, building confidence in themselves, balancing the roles they carry, building relationships with legislators and stakeholders, working collectively with other school counselors, dealing with resistance, and using

their voices for change. These advocacy experiences were beyond the scope and outside of their normal duties as an employed school counselor, which means they took greater personal and professional risks for a possible greater reward for all students.

Despite CACREP (2009, 2016) standards that mandate pre-service school counselors receive training for advocacy at multiple levels, findings of the current study support school counselor literature that suggests that school counselors are not taught public arena advocacy skills in pre-service programs and school counselors feel ill prepared to advocate to stakeholders beyond their school buildings (Cigrand, Havlik, Malott, & Jones, 2015; Crawford, Arnold, & Brown, 2014; Lee, Smith, & Henry, 2013). The findings however, also support Trusty and Brown's (2005) list of dispositions, knowledge and skills that school counselors need to develop in order to be successful in public arena advocacy. The essence of the experiences of school counseling leaders encompassed a growth in their self-efficacy, knowledge and abilities to speak up for what they know is right for students.

## Implications

The goal of this study was to describe the experiences of school counseling leaders who advocate at the legislative/public arena level for students and school counseling. Though not everything could have been realized by me, the researcher, because of my own experience at the time that I interviewed the participants, the findings of this study offer multiple implications for the field of school counseling. There are specific implications for school counselor practitioners, school counselor educators, school counselor associations, and the social justice work of school counselors.

**School Counselors**

The participants in this study repeatedly described their commitment and passion for their profession. This commitment and passion leads to the motivation to think bigger and advocate for systemic changes. ASCA's (2016) ethical standards require school counselors to advocate "for an education system that provides optimal learning environments for all students" (para. 1). Though this study does highlight school counselors who have been heavily engaged in public arena advocacy, my participants spoke frequently about working with other school counselors who did not share this passion and commitment. Their shared frustrations speak to the need for more school counselors to step into this arena and take some personal and possibly professional risks to ensure that all students have equitable access to comprehensive school counseling services that will ultimately assist them in reaching their potential.

The findings in this study show that the participants found relief in establishing relationships with legislators and stakeholders as well as genuine surprise at discovering that legislators are just human beings who actually desire the information school counselors hold about student success. School counselors need to know that they can build a political identity, influence public policy and create social change by engaging in direct involvement with legislators. As the participants shared, legislators will seek credible sources of information regarding bills and political initiatives. Inviting a legislator to interact with the school counselor in a school building is a way to foster a positive, reciprocal relationship. Elected officials could be invited as guest speakers for career days or included as members of school counseling advisory committees. A school counseling advisory committee meeting is an opportunity to educate the legislator on data

resulting from specific school counseling interventions with measured positive impacts on students in that legislator's constituency. Additionally, during this meeting, the school counselor has an opportunity to highlight all aspects of how a comprehensive counseling program serves all students in preparing them for college and careers. Legislators need to hear this information from school counseling practitioners who are positively impacting students' lives and this highlights the counselor as a valuable and credible source of information for the legislator .

As citizens, school counselors should research information regarding their own elected officials in the district they live and reach out to build a relationship as a constituent. At all times, counselors should be able to give a brief overview of the profession of school counseling and the benefits students receive from a comprehensive counseling program to any stakeholder. Amanda spoke specifically about school counselors being able to deliver an 'elevator speech' that explains the value of school counseling in the amount of time it takes to go up 30 floors in an elevator.

Diplomatic advocacy within a school building is a must for all school counselors when promoting equity for all students (Rock & Reed, 2020). Cigrand et al. (2015) stated that professional advocacy of school counselors is, "school counselors' efforts to promote awareness and support for their professional role" (p.10). Efficacy is associated with one's belief in their ability to persevere and influence change (Bandura, 1997), therefore, practicing diplomacy and advocacy at the client/student level in a school building can help build skills and self-efficacy for professional advocacy work in the public arena.

School counselors can begin to feel more confident in their profession by becoming involved at a greater level within their state school counselor association. Volunteering on committees can help a novice or even an experienced counselor get involved at a level they are comfortable with which will open doors for further involvement while building a larger supportive peer network.  Additionally, it is important that school counselors seek professional development that will facilitate growth in public arena advocacy skills through their professional organization, continuing education resources, or even through classes at colleges and universities.  Even if a school counselor did not receive formal training in their pre-service program, research shows that self-efficacy in advocacy and leadership is a quality that can be taught and developed (Mullen, Newhart, Haskins, Shapiro, & Cassel, 2019).  School counselors working in large school systems may find this training in their district offices.  Those in smaller districts can form working groups with other school counselors that are geographically convenient even if not in the same district to create supportive networks that can then speak as a group and have power in numbers when engaging in social and political action.

**School Counselor Education & Training**

The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) requires higher education institutions to prepare future graduates to advocate for student success and the removal of barriers that impede academic, career and personal/social development (CACREP, 2016).  Toporek et al. (2009) acknowledged a need to train counselors in systemic issues and interventions, however, Chang et al. (2012) found that most pre-service institutions are not preparing their students for

advocacy work. Additionally, Lee, Smith, and Henry (2013) found that most counselor educators do not have first-hand experience with which to teach a course on public arena advocacy. All participants confirmed that they were not explicitly taught advocacy skills or the knowledge they use at this level in their pre-service programs. However, Freeman, who was the most recent graduate, did note that his university taught him to "understand strategy, how systems work, how people work together, how to craft your language…They helped me understand what people who have power look like, how to identify power and how to use the language that will help them respond to our needs more effectively".

In a study on the experiences of school counseling professors who have taught advocacy skills, the researchers found three themes: teaching and role modeling, focusing on active learning and role modeling strategies to deliver content; communicating their roles by leaning on the ASCA national model and student data; and barriers to preparing students for professional advocacy, such as fear of job loss for speaking up and the reality that there is little time for advocacy in a counselor's day (Havlik, Malott, Yee, DeRosato, & Crawford, 2019). These themes and the participants in the current study offer multiple strategies that pre-service educators can use to teach public arena advocacy skills in an introduction to school counseling or internship course.

Through teaching advocacy components of the ASCA national model (2019), students can begin to build a strong professional identity as a school counselor and as an advocate for students. With active learning as a pedagogical strategy, teachers can require students to prepare and deliver a professional identity statement to classmates and practice effective communication skills with stakeholders or elected officials through role

play scenarios. Practicing difficult, yet critical, conversations will help to alleviate some of the pressure and worry about being seen as a trouble maker when students understand how to direct the conversations to student benefit. Professors could also invite their local elected officials in as guest speakers to their class, serving two purposes. Students would get to interact with a legislator on an informal level, reducing anxiety related to speaking with someone in power. Additionally, this would strengthen the relationship between the professor and the legislator, creating a positive connection to school counseling for the legislator.

School counselors who wish to engage in public arena advocacy will need to know and understand the legislative landscape. This means understanding the key legislators in your area as well as legislators assigned to education, mental health, and youth focused committees and subcommittees. A class assignment could require students to compile information regarding these legislators through the use of the state legislative website. Typically, these websites will contain information regarding occupations, committee memberships, legislative agendas, and voting history of each legislator. Being equipped with this information helped my participants to build their confidence in advocacy efforts. This type of exercise for students can help them to understand the connection between what happens in the legislature, what happens in school buildings, and why certain policies exist.

Almost all participants in this study mentioned attending a 'Day on the Hill' event with their state school counselor association. This could be an annual class requirement for students in a school counseling program. During this event, professors could require students to attempt to coordinate a visit with their local elected official if their permanent

residence is in that state, or with a legislator that is connected to the training institution. Emily, a university professor, makes this a mandatory activity for her students every year and is committed to continuing this activity every year because of the impact and inspiration it brings her students.

Many participants mentioned becoming a member of their state school counselor association while in graduate school. This could be considered a requirement of school counseling training programs, encouraging students to become further involved through volunteer opportunities within the organization or even submitting conference proposals. The earlier a student becomes involved in the school counseling community, the earlier they will begin to own the professional identity of being a school counselor.

The findings in this study demonstrate the need for pre-service institutions to explicitly teach a course covering how to engage in public arena advocacy and the knowledge needed to feel competent to step into this arena earlier in a school counselor's career. Counselor educators may use the counselor-advocate-scholar framework provided by Ratts and Pederson (2014) to help counseling students understand the significance of each of these separate areas as well as the interplay between them. Additionally, practicum or internship classes could require students to complete the School Counselor Leadership Survey created by Young and Bryan (2015) and the School Counseling Advocacy Assessment (Haskins & Singh, 2016), as tools to teach leadership factors. Although these tools are intended to assess school counselors' leadership and advocacy abilities within a school building at the client/student level, they will help students feel confident as they develop advocate leader identities. School counselors in training need to understand the importance of public arena advocacy for the profession as

well as develop skills with which they can be confident stepping into this arena. Thus, institutions must increase advocacy discussions and training in required coursework.

**School Counselor Associations**

All participants in this study spoke of involvement in their state associations and mentioned receiving learning, encouragement, and mentoring from the other members and the leadership teams. Indeed, to increase the involvement of members in advocacy efforts at a public arena level, school counselor associations need to begin intentional mentoring of members expressing interest in this type of advocacy work. However, associations must be intentional and explicit in differentiating client/student advocacy from public arena advocacy because there are inherent differences (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Every school counselor must advocate for their students at their local school with administration, teachers and parents. However, public arena advocacy looks very different and carries with it a greater risk. Likewise, with greater risk comes greater reward.

State associations typically have politically strategic goals driven by current events and legislative initiatives in order to serve their members. Participants mentioned the importance of having a unified voice and consistent messaging among school counselors regarding these goals. This messaging needs to be consistent throughout all of the association's communication with their membership. Similar to branding efforts, the unified message regarding goals that the association has agreed upon needs to evident in all informational documents, social media releases, and prominently advertised in any publications of the association.

Many of the participants spoke about participating on an advocacy committee or a government relations committee. Carefully assembled government relations and/or advocacy committees can provide skills, energy, and commitment to advocacy initiatives and strengthen the organizational infrastructure of the association. It is important for SCA's to have a committee whose objectives are centered on teaching advocacy skills at the local client/student level. This committee could conduct trainings regarding building relationships with administrators, teachers, stakeholders, and parents in order to build skills in advocating for individual students at the client/student level. A separate committee dedicated to advocacy at the public arena level should also be built to better train their membership on public arena advocacy. This committee could focus trainings on skills that aid in building relationships with local elected officials and state legislators including; identifying legislators that represent specific districts and researching their political agendas (voting history, political party, community involvement), etiquette required in communication with legislators (handwritten letters instead of form letters/emails, using personal time and technology instead of work hours and school email/computer, appropriate attire at the capital), how to pull a legislator off of the floor to speak with them when at the capital during the legislative session, and how to quickly deliver an impactful and engaging message that will catch a legislator's attention and interest.

Participants in this study noted that they did not receive explicit training in their graduate programs. State associations need to provide training to their membership regarding their strategic goals and messaging in order to reduce the internal resistance that the participants of this study described. Training that supports the development of

school counselors from all levels of experience that wish to become effective public arena and social justice advocates will increase the success of state associations in reaching their goals. School counselor associations can hold conference sessions, webinars, and trainings that teach practitioners concrete implementation of public arena advocacy strategies.

One possibility could be a half-day intensive training held just before or at the conclusion of a conference for those members who wish to get involved in public arena advocacy, but feel ill prepared. The first half of the training could educate participants about the strategic goals and legislative agendas that the organization has chosen to focus on for the year and why these priorities will ultimately help the organization and students. The second half of the training could focus on specific actions that members need to take in order to advance the advocacy agenda. This may include dates of upcoming hearings that will be held, the names and contact information of legislators that members need to contact, and even asking for lists of volunteer commitments from the participants. As Jessie suggested catering information to legislators in a specific way, this training could cover how to reduce complex school and student data into informative, yet simple graphics that pose the information in a political context to which legislators and other stakeholders are likely to respond. Just as students need to learn the skill of delivering an 'elevator speech', so do practitioners. During this training, time could be provided for participants to role play these speeches with one another, thereby helping each participant to create their own authentic messaging that incorporates the unified message from the association. A state association could incorporate any of these activities as part of an

agenda during a board, leadership team or general membership meeting in order to educate and train members.

Legislators typically respond positively to being invited to speak and share insights with organizations that they support. Associations should capitalize on this by inviting supportive legislators or even legislative staff to meet with their executive boards or membership to share insights about what types of advocacy efforts work for them and what does not. Additionally, the association could invite an experienced lobbyist to consult with the organization and provide trainings on current public policy issues.

As Etta James said, "I feel like this is a podcast and that it is a topic that counselors need to be listening to. This has me fired up thinking about a lot of different things, but I wish there was a system in place that would allow counselors to get the relevant professional development they needed to be successful in this area." State school counselor associations are perfectly positioned to be able to provide this training.

**Social Justice Advocacy**

As Emily stated, "School counseling is social justice. I don't know how to separate it from school counseling itself, it just is." Social justice is based on the belief that all individuals are equally valuable, deserve human rights and to live in a just and democratic society of equal opportunity (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). As many of the participants shared, while advocating for the profession of school counseling, they were advocating for all students. All students deserve equitable access to a comprehensive school counseling program, which creates a social justice issue when they do not. Dahir and Stone (2009) told school counselors that they, "are ideally situated in schools to serve as social justice advocates to eliminate the achievement gap and to focus

their efforts on ensuring success for every underserved and underrepresented student" (p. 12).

School counselors, like the participants in this study, often feel a strong calling to the field which is a good predictor of involvement in social justice work (Wheelus, 2017). Both the ACA and the ASCA's ethical standards and competencies require school counselors to engage in advocacy that will impact the lives of all children. Dollarhide, Clevenger, Dogan, and Edwards's (2016) four themes explained how school counselors absorb early experiences regarding the recognition of injustice, causing changes in their outlook, and eventually leading to the creation of a social justice identity that was immersed in constant reflection and questioning. Developing a social justice identity was defined by Dollarhide, Clevenger, Dogan, and Edwards (2016) as "the pervasive internalization of social justice values and the consistent demonstration of commitment to foster social justice in schools." Etta James, Emily, and Jessie all strongly expressed their opinion that school counselors who are not dedicated to these ideals should look for another profession, because ultimately, this is about improving the lives of children. This study highlights the need for more school counselors to engage in public arena and social justice advocacy in order to create greater systemic changes for all students.

## Limitations

This study offered a preliminary view surrounding the essence of the experiences of school counseling leaders advocating at the legislative/public arena level. However, there were limitations involved with this study including factors specific to phenomenological inquiries. While this form of discovery focuses in on the lived experiences of a specific population, it does not include the perspective of the legislators

or stakeholders with whom these participants interacted which is a limitation of this research.

The sample of participants included seven females and five males. The majority of the participants identified as White, with only three participants identifying as persons of color. This lack of diversity in the sample presents a limitation, as few of the participants were able to address the interplay of racial identity with public arena advocacy. Additionally, this may not represent the advocacy and leadership values of school counselors who identify with racially underrepresented school counselors. All of the participants offered middle class as their socioeconomic status. Effects of socio-economic class, though inexplicably tied to the salary schedules for school counselors, could also not be filtered out. An additional demographic limitation is the amount of experience these school counseling leaders have. Only one of the school counselors had less than 10 years of experience and therefore, this study does not offer views of emerging advocates in this arena presenting another limitation.

An additional limitation to the study is related to member checking. After sending copies of transcripts to my participants, three did not respond regarding the validity of the transcripts. Though I shared my findings with all participants via email, I only received feedback from five stating that they agreed with the findings. Despite offering to have a follow up conversation regarding the findings, only three participants engaged in follow up conversations. Though each of these sources of feedback were positive regarding the findings, there were many participants from which there was no feedback.

The last limitation in this study relates to the virtual format of the interviews. Because of geographical location, this limited the interview conductions to Zoom, a virtual videoconferencing application allowing participants to see one another. Though this platform is better than telephone interviews, it did limit the interpretation of body language. Additionally, internet connectivity issues were present in two of the interviews which caused some delays and loss of statements. These internet connectivity issues may have limited the conversations by cutting off sentences and causing participants to get off track. Finally, this study was conducted during the 2020 Coronavirus self-quarantine and stay-at-home order time period. Therefore, even the geographically convenient interviews were required to be conducted via Zoom.

## Recommendations for Future Research

There are numerous studies that could extend the results of this study. For example, a longitudinal qualitative study could be conducted with school counselors interested in public arena advocacy to track their development as a leader advocate. Many school counseling leaders are not active in public arena advocacy. What is the difference between those leaders that choose to opt in to advocate in the public arena and those that do not? How much does one's levels of self-efficacy play into whether or not a leader engages in public arena advocacy? Further studies could also include a greater racial diversity to determine how much race plays in the success of advocates in the public arena.

Another future study could include the impact of social media campaigns on public arena advocacy efforts for school counseling. Many of the participants talked about the importance of social media involvement, but there was not a consensus on how

much involvement and to what extent they believed stakeholders should be included in it. Emily stated, "I have been able to use social media as an advocacy tool. You have to be savvy, somewhat constrained, and thoughtful about it. But there are opportunities for advocacy in social media." As it is a recognized tool of awareness, it is necessary to study the true nature of its impact on public arena advocacy for the school counseling profession.

Future research should also explore the challenge aspect of public arena advocacy. All of the participants in this study talked about persevering through the challenges and resistance. However, there are other advocates that back out. What is the difference between these two types of advocates? What allows some to persevere while others quit?

Surprisingly, participants did not mention specifics to their state, though each state legislature has its own set of norms, processes, and governing preferences. For example, Georgia is known as a 'local control' state, which means that the legislature creates guidelines for its counties and districts but primarily leaves the final decision making to the local counties and districts (Freeman, 2002). Etta James mentioned in her interview that Virginia legislators also like to keep legislation general in order to avoid looking like they are telling their constituents what to do. A valid area of research would be to investigate any effect state processes have on any differences in advocacy work from state to state.

**Chapter Summary**

Investigating the experiences of school counseling leaders who have advocated for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public arena level allowed

multiple themes to emerge which contribute to the current literature. The findings

revealed multiple processes that school counselors experience as they advocate at higher

levels. Ultimately, these experiences embodied a growth in these participants' self-

efficacy, knowledge, abilities, and sense of purpose to speak up for what they know is

right for children.

This study contributes to the literature regarding school counselors and

legislative/public arena advocacy. However, more literature on this topic is necessary.

The limitations of this study highlight opportunities for further research. These school

counseling leaders felt strongly that advocating for systemic change is a critical need and

a responsibility to take seriously. As this study captures the essence of school counseling

leaders, it seems fitting to utilize a participant's statement to conclude it. Jessie stated

that, "The definition of advocacy is not giving up on the things you believe in and that are

the right things to do for kids." School counselors dedicate their careers to making

children's lives better. This chapter summarized what school counseling leaders

experience as they try to do this on grander scale through advocating to create systemic

change for all students. This is critical as greater numbers of school counselors engaging

in public arena advocacy could change the landscape of education and development for

all students.

## Epilogue

I have been looking forward to writing this section and being at this point for so

long. It means that I am finally done. I did this doctoral program and dissertation with a

full time job, four active children, a husband who travels for work, and I finished it all up

during a global pandemic. This was a sacrifice, but a sacrifice that I have enjoyed and

from which I have truly grown.  Now I can focus on being Mom to my kids, being a better, more engaged friend, and ultimately, a normal human again!

Coming into this doc program, I really did not want to do 'me-search' because I earnestly just wanted to contribute to the field of school counseling.  I ended up doing it anyway, but with the hope that what I've created makes a difference.  The years that I have spent advocating for my profession are poured into the reason why I chose this topic and into what it has turned out to be.  I heard someone say recently, "The heart cannot be legislated."  This is so true.  However, a lot of heart goes into influencing legislation so that we can make the world a better place.

The stories of my participants are close to my heart and I had so much fun in those conversations.  Each quote that I highlighted and categorized, is important and personal.  When I read their quotes again, I remember the feeling I had when they said them and the way their voices sounded as they described their passion. Being a school counselor has become a core part of my identity and when I am with others who feel as strongly as I do about it, it feels like home and a party with all your best friends.

Now I get to say that I am finished with this chapter of my life.  I can't wait to see what I turn this into.  For now, though, I can say, "I did it."

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**APPENDIX A**

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Hello.

My name is Jennifer Diaz, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of school counselor leaders who have advocated for the profession at the legislative/public arena level.

With your permission, I will interview you today about your experiences as a school counselor leader. You were selected as a potential participant because of your experience as a school counselor and advocacy activities in which you have participated. During the interview, I will ask you questions related to your experiences advocating with legislators and other stakeholders.

The information we discuss will be confidential and your identity will not be revealed in any documentation associated with this study. Indirect identifiers, such as the pseudonym you selected, will be used.

I expect this interview to last no longer than one to one and a half hour. I will audio record and video record the interview as well as take reflective notes during our conversation. I will transcribe this interview verbatim and will send you a copy of the transcribed interview to ensure the transcription reflects your recollection of the interview and your intended meaning.

You may end the interview at any point and you may decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. If you are unsure of a question, let me know and I will clarify the question. Do you have any questions for me before we begin the interview?

**Research Question**

What are the experiences of school counselor leaders who advocate for the profession of school counseling at the legislative/public arena level?

**Demographic Information**

1. What is your current job title?

2. Where do you currently work?

3. In what state are you located?

4. How many years of experience do you have as a school counselor?

5. What types of legislative/public arena advocacy activities have you participated in?

6. Do you hold or have you ever held any leadership positions in a professional association for counseling?

**Interview Questions**

1. I'd like you to think back to when you first started to get involved in advocacy work as a School Counselor.

    a. When was it that you first got involved in advocacy work? What do you remember about the circumstances and what led you to get involved?

b.  Were there individuals that inspired you or that led the way for you in your advocacy work? What did you learn from them? How did their mentorship affect you?

c.  What was that learning process like in the early days of your advocacy? What skills or knowledge did you fall back on? What new skills or approaches did you have to develop?

2.  I'm curious about what you believe has helped make you a successful advocate for school counseling.

a.  Were there things you learned in a degree program or some other formal educational experience?

b.  What skills or attributes do you rely on? Where do those skills/attributes come from? How did you develop them?

c.  What was the process of gaining confidence in the advocacy arena like?

d.  What challenges have you faced?  How were you able to overcome those challenges?

e.  Where do you find the courage and motivation to get started, and to persist?

f.  How has privilege affected your advocacy work? Where has it helped with access?

3.  In looking back over your advocacy experiences, I'm wondering about the moments or experiences that really stand out to you.

a.  Are there any particular moments or experiences that come to mind?

b.  What is it about those moments that are meaningful to you?

  c. How do those moments connect with your definition of what advocacy

   means to you?

  d. What do those moments say about why advocacy is important to you?

4. What have we not discussed regarding your experiences advocating for school

 counseling at the public arena level would you like to add?

***Possible follow up questions:***

5. How do you blend and balance the demands of the work of a school counselor

 and public arena advocacy?

6. What does collaboration with decision makers in the public arena look like?

7. What is your opinion of school counselors advocating for social justice work?

 What are some social justice issues facing school counselors today?

8. What are some of the unwritten rules to advocacy work?

Thank you again for your participation in this study. I want to remind you that you may

withdraw from participation at any time as previously discussed. If you have any

questions about the study or feel like you need assistance after your participation in this

interview, please do not hesitation to contact me or my committee chair, Dr. Jolie Daigle.

I can be reached at jenniferdiaz20@uga.edu and Dr. Daigle at jdaigle@uga.edu. I will

send you a copy of the transcribed interview through email and will ask that you verify I

have transcribed it as you remember the conversation. Once I have completed the data

analysis and interpretation of the data, I will contact you to schedule a follow up

interview. The follow up interview will allow you an opportunity to offer feedback and

provide any additional relevant information.  Again, thank you for your time and have a great rest of your day.

**APPENDIX B**

**Email Recruitment Letter**

Dear **prospective participant**,

My name is Jennifer Diaz and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling

and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a

research study for my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Jolie Daigle, and I invite you

to consider participating in this study. The title of my study is, "Public Arena Advocacy:

Experiences of school counseling leaders." This study has been approved by the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Georgia (PROJECT#00002283).

You are invited to participate in this dissertation research study about public arena

advocacy for school counselor leaders. Your responses can contribute to school

counselor practice, as well as advocacy efforts for the profession.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of school counseling leaders who

have advocated at the public arena level. The criteria for participation in this study:

> 1. Participants must be certified/licensed school counselors who have at least
>
> three years of work experience.
>
> 2. Participants must have engaged in legislative/public arena advocacy activities.
>
> Examples of these activities could be collaborating with groups to address
>
> systemic issues through changing public perception or policies or social/political

advocacy raising awareness of or speaking on behalf of issues to stakeholders in larger arenas. More specific examples could include: contact with state legislators or school board members regarding school counseling via telephone or in person, visiting the state capital as part of a state school counselor association government affairs/advocacy day, testifying at a legislative or education board hearing, or presenting to legislators and/or education board members at local community listening sessions.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, provide a recent copy of your resume and engage in two Zoom interviews scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time. The first interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes, with a possible follow up interview that will take approximately 30 minutes. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview in order to ensure clarity and that I have reflected your experiences accurately.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be participating as a volunteer. Participation may be withdrawn at any time. All data collected in this study will remain confidential as you will be able to choose a pseudonym to protect your identity. Any information collected as part of this study will remain confidential to the extent possible and will only be disclosed with your permission or as required by law. All participants will receive a $25.00 Amazon gift card for participating at the conclusion of the study.

If you agree to participate in this study, please reply to this e-mail letting me know your agreement. I will get back in touch with you to schedule the initial interview.

If you have any questions about the actual study, please contact me at this e-mail address or my Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Jolie Daigle at jdaigle@uga.edu. If you

have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, please contact the UGA

IRB at 706-542-3199 or by e-mail at IRB@uga.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jennifer Diaz, Ed.S., LPC

UGA Doctoral Candidate

# APPENDIX C

## Demographic Questionnaire

*Public Arena Advocacy: Experiences of School Counseling Leaders*

**Name:** _____

**Chosen Pseudonym:** _____

**Demographic Information**

1. What is your current job title?

2. Where do you currently work?

3. In what state are you located?

4. What is the highest degree you have earned?

5. How many years of experience do you have as a school counselor?

6. What types of legislative/public arena advocacy activities have you participated in?

7. What, if any, leadership positions in a professional association for counseling do you currently hold or have you held in the past?

8. With what race do you identify?

9. With what gender do you identify?

10. With what socio-economic class do you identify?

**APPENDIX D**

**UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**
**CONSENT LETTER**
**Public Arena Advocacy: Experiences of School Counseling Leaders**

Dear Participant,

My name is Jennifer Diaz and I am a student in the Counseling and Human Development

Services Department at the University of Georgia under the supervision of Dr. Jolie

Daigle.  I am inviting you to take part in a research study.

I am doing research on the experiences of school counselors who have participated in

public arena advocacy.  This study will inform school counselors and school counselor

educators about public arena advocacy for the profession and what it entails.  The

research question guiding this study is "What are the experiences of school counselor

leaders who advocate for students and school counseling services at the legislative/public

arena level?"

I am looking for certified/licensed school counselors with three or more years of

experience who have actively engaged in public arena advocacy activities.  These

activities could be advocating to legislators or other elected officials regarding legislation

or policy that affects school counseling.  Specifically, this could be activities such as:

contact with state legislators or school board members regarding school counseling via

telephone or in person, visiting the state capital as part of a state school counselor

association government affairs/advocacy day, testifying at a legislative or education

board hearing, or presenting to legislators and/or education board members at local community listening sessions.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and provide the most recent copy of your resume. You will also be asked to participate in an initial interview that will be recorded and transcribed. This initial interview will last approximately one to one and one half hours. After the interview is transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. After you have reviewed the transcript, you will have the opportunity to participate in a second interview where you may provide any feedback to ensure I have captured your responses and make any corrections you deem necessary. Each session will be recorded using an audio recording device. You will choose a pseudonym with which I will label any records associated with your participation.

A $25.00 Amazon gift card will be sent to each participant at the conclusion of the study. Your name, school/organization name, email address, and phone number will be kept by me should it be needed for accounting purposes. If needed, the information will be provided to the Business Manager in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia.

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort will be taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

Participation is voluntary. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. If there are questions that make you uncomfortable, you may skip these

questions if you do not wish to answer them. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to discontinue participation will not impact the receipt of the gift card at the conclusion of the study.

Research records will be labeled with your unique pseudonym that are linked to you by a separate list that includes your name. This list and any identifiers will be removed and destroyed once we have finished collecting information from all participants. This results of this research study may be published in a professional publication or shared during a professional presentation, but your name and/or any identifying information will not be used. Your chosen pseudonym will be used in any publication or presentation. The data from this study may continue to contribute to professional studies in the long term, however, any future studies will only include your chosen pseudonym.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at 770-313-1604 or send an e-mail to jenniferdiaz20@uga.edu. Dr. Daigle can be reached by e-mail at jdaigle@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by e-mail at IRB@uga.edu.

Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Diaz
Doctoral Candidate
University of Georgia
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
770.313.1604
jenniferdiaz20@uga.edu

**APPENDIX E**

**Memo Summary Sheet**

Interviewer: Jennifer Diaz          Interviewee Pseudonym: _____

Today's Date: _____

1. Summary of interview.

2. What were the main issues or themes that stuck out for you in this contact?

3. What discrepancies, if any, did you note in the interviewee's responses?

4. Anything else that stuck out as salient, interesting, or important in this contact?

5. General comments about how this interviewee's responses compared with other interviewees: