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School Counselors' Strategies for Social Justice Change: A Grounded Theory of What Works in the Real World

A qualitative study used a grounded theory methodology to explore the strategies that 16 school counselors who self-identified as social justice agents used to advocate for systemic change within their school communities. Findings included seven overarching themes: (a) using political savvy to navigate power structures, (b) consciousness raising, (c) initiating difficult dialogues, (d) building intentional relationships, (e) teaching students self-advocacy skills, (f) using data for marketing, and (g) educating others about the school counselor role of advocate.

A rich body of literature identifies the important role of school counselor advocacy in addressing issues of societal inequity in schools (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Cox & Lee, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; House & Martin, 1999). However, limited research addresses the question of how school counselors can be trained to assume this challenging role (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Further, few published studies explore the subjective experiences of school counselors with regard to what their advocacy "looks like" in practice (Field & Baker, 2004; Pennymon, 2005). The voices of practicing school counselor advocates are thus absent from the social justice literature in school counseling. Recent literature suggests that qualitative approaches offer important ways to gain in-depth understanding of how school counselors develop and implement advocacy strategies (Singh, in press; Trusty & Brown). The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the literature on school counselor advocacy through identification of a grounded theory of how school counselors who identify as social justice agents advocate for systemic change within their school communities.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Over the past decade, the school counseling literature has focused increasingly on the importance of advocacy work on the part of school counselors (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Cox & Lee, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; House & Martin, 1999). School counselor advocates are encouraged to address educational inequities and differences in academic achievement that may be grounded in issues of race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability status, and sexual orientation, and that may prevent many students from maximizing their academic, social, and personal potential (Cox & Lee; Singh, in press). In order to address these systemic injustices, there has been a growing movement to expand the counseling role from its traditional emphasis on the intrapsychic concerns of individual students to a broader focus on the external forces that have an adverse effect on students' intellectual, social, and psychological development (Goodman et al., 2004, Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee, 2007).

Although a thorough review of this movement is beyond the scope of this article, there are important school counseling initiatives that have laid the groundwork for advocacy. The Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI), a collaboration with the Education Trust, began in 1996 to examine innovative roles for school counselors. TSCI asserted that advocacy must be a critical counseling role, especially as it relates to the collection of data to highlight educational disparities (Paisley & Hayes, 2002). Shortly thereafter, the American School Counselor Association created the ASCA National Model®. This model defined school counselors' roles as advocates and addressed the question of "How are students different because of what school counselors do?" The ASCA National Model (2005), which offers a comprehensive framework to guide school counseling programs, is based on the qualities of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration, which are intended to lead to systemic change.

Further, in 2003 the American Counseling Association (ACA) endorsed its formal Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). This set of competencies encourages all counselors to advocate on three levels (student/

client, school/community, and public arena) to resolve social justice issues rooted in environmental and systemic factors. The ASCA National Model and ACA Advocacy Competencies are critical resources for school counselor advocates; however, limited research offers insight into how school counselors in the field incorporate these guidelines into their advocacy work. The challenge of how to infuse advocacy missions into school counselor training programs thus remains.

TRAINING SCHOOL COUNSELORS AS SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES

Three empirical studies have examined the extent to which counseling programs prepare students to be effective social justice advocates. Ratts (2006) used a survey method to assess advocacy training in programs across the United States and found only a moderate emphasis on advocacy competencies in training programs. In another quantitative study, Kircher (2007) found that faculty assessment of counseling trainees' readiness to apply advocacy competencies in practice settings was similarly modest. Thus, although school counselor training programs are being called to structure their curricular goals to prepare students to become social justice advocates and to understand how these competencies operate in concert with multicultural competencies (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007), research in response to this call has been limited (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Ratts et al., 2007).

In a qualitative study evaluating school counselors' advocacy training, Pennymon (2005) examined events that either facilitated or hindered counselors' social justice learning. Pennymon found a gap in training between the teaching of advocacy on a theoretical level and the reality of working as an advocate in a school setting. Additional findings indicated that a graduate program that did not infuse advocacy into its philosophy, mission statement, and training model hampered advocacy preparation. This research also indicated that cohort experiences, faculty modeling, and the cultivation of self-efficacy were helpful in training school counselors to be advocates for social justice.

USING GROUNDED THEORY APPROACHES IN SCHOOL COUNSELING RESEARCH

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) is a rigorous research process that involves generating a conceptual model (or theory) that is "grounded" in the data. Grounded theory research designs in school counseling have proven useful in describing how school counselors implement comprehensive school counseling programs, as well as how school counselors are perceived by school administrators. We discuss two exemplar grounded theory studies in order to demonstrate the utility of a grounded theory approach in school counseling research. First, Scarborough and Luke (2008) used a grounded theory design to examine the components of school counselors' successful implementation of developmental school counseling programs. Though limited by a relatively homogeneous participant group (female, European American), Scarborough and Luke's study identified important contextual factors and activities vital to successful program implementation (e.g., marketing, planning, evaluating). This study is an important example of grounded theory at its best in school counseling because there were extensive verification standards used in the research design. Further, the study provided clear implications for school counselor training and ongoing professional development.

In a second study using a rigorous grounded theory research design, Amatea and Clark (2005) examined public school administrators' conceptions of the primary roles of school counselors in their school communities across various school levels. The researchers found that administrators held four important role conceptions: innovative school leader, collaborative case consultant, responsive direct service provider, and administrative team player. The authors used a recursive data collection and analysis approach, in which new data collected were analyzed and informed by previous data, in addition to using several verification standards (e.g., member checking, reflexivity) and identifying researcher assumptions prior to data collection. Both grounded theory studies demonstrate the utility of this approach in gaining in-depth understanding of certain phenomena in school counseling.

Because the purpose of the present study was to describe the social justice strategies that school counselor advocates use to promote change in their settings, we used a grounded theory tradition (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Specifically, the research question guiding the present study was "What advocacy strategies do school counselors who self-identify as social justice advocates use to enact change within their school communities?"

METHOD

Research Team
The research team was made up of a school counselor educator (South Asian American woman), a counseling psychology doctoral student (White American woman), two master's-level counseling students (White American women), and a school counselor (Jewish American woman). Each of the

> Few published studies explore the subjective experiences of school counselors with regard to what their advocacy "looks like" in practice.

researchers had significant experience working, volunteering, delivering interventions, and/or conducting research in public junior high and high schools. The school counselor educator and the doctoral student had previous experience conducting qualitative research, and all research team members had extensive training in multicultural and social justice issues in counseling. The team met weekly or bimonthly throughout a year-long research process. In the beginning of the research process, the researchers identified their assumptions about the topic of research. Researcher bias included a value of social justice advocacy and the belief that school counselors are instrumental in making positive systemic change. Our researcher assumptions also included anticipation that school counselor advocates would share stories of institutional racism and other inequities in schools. As data collection began, we conducted initial analysis and constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) of the data in the meetings. In the final stages of the research, the meetings were used to conduct an audit trail, identify findings, conduct negative case analysis, and review reflexive journals kept by the research team members.

Participants

Participants were 16 professional school counselors who self-identified as social justice advocates. Twelve participants were female and 4 were male. Their ages ranged from 27 to 56 years (M = 39 years). Eleven participants identified as White, 4 identified as African American, and 1 identified as Asian. With regard to class status, 5 identified as upper middle class, 10 identified as middle class, and 1 identified as lower middle class. Fourteen participants held master's degrees in school counseling, and two participants held doctoral degrees in counselor education. Six participants were employed in public elementary schools, 2 were employed in public middle schools, 1 was employed in a private middle school, and 7 were employed in public high schools. The participants' professional school counseling experience ranged from 1 year to 22 years (M = 8.6 years).

Sampling Procedures

Researchers circulated electronic flyers detailing the focus of the study to school counselor listservs in the Southeastern United States (i.e., Southeastern state chapters of ASCA). As the researchers sought information-rich cases, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to establish criteria for participant selection. Selection criteria included (a) holding a master's degree in school counseling, (b) having work experience as a professional school counselor, and (c) identifying as a social justice advocate. Participants who expressed interest were sent informed consent forms electronically. These forms explained the study, described all relevant procedures, and invited questions. Once all questions were answered and each participant signed and returned the consent form, the researchers and participants arranged a date to conduct the research interview. All participants also were sent a demographic form electronically, which they returned prior to the interview. If participants did not specify a pseudonym on their demographic form, one was assigned to them. To protect confidentiality, all participants were referred to by their pseudonyms for the duration of this study.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, indicating their choice of pseudonym, age, gender, race/ethnicity, school setting, education level, socioeconomic status, and number of years working as a school counselor post-master's degree. Participants also provided a definition of social justice and of the role of school counselors as advocates/change agents in the school community.

Semi-structured interview. Each participant completed one semi-structured interview (45–120 minutes). Ten participants were interviewed in person and 6 participants were interviewed by phone. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed based on a literature review and several discussions among the research team members. The interview questions and process were then piloted with one participant interview. The participant's feedback from this pilot interview was then incorporated into the final interview protocol. Interview questions focused on the experiences of school counselors in enacting change, as well as on the strategies they used as advocates. Participants were given the flexibility to express their unique experiences as advocates. Follow-up questions varied and were guided by the material provided by each participant.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Recursivity was built into each stage of the research process so that simultaneous data collection and analysis continuously informed each other and, in turn, the emerging grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). After the first two interviews were transcribed, four research team members individually reviewed and coded the transcripts using an open coding process. Open coding involved analyzing each line or paragraph of the transcripts for codes reflecting each participant's experiences. More specifically, each discrete idea, event, or experience was given a name (e.g., "courage," "dialoguing," "student empowerment"). To create a codebook for the remaining interviews, researchers used constant comparison with their discrete codes to identify cat-

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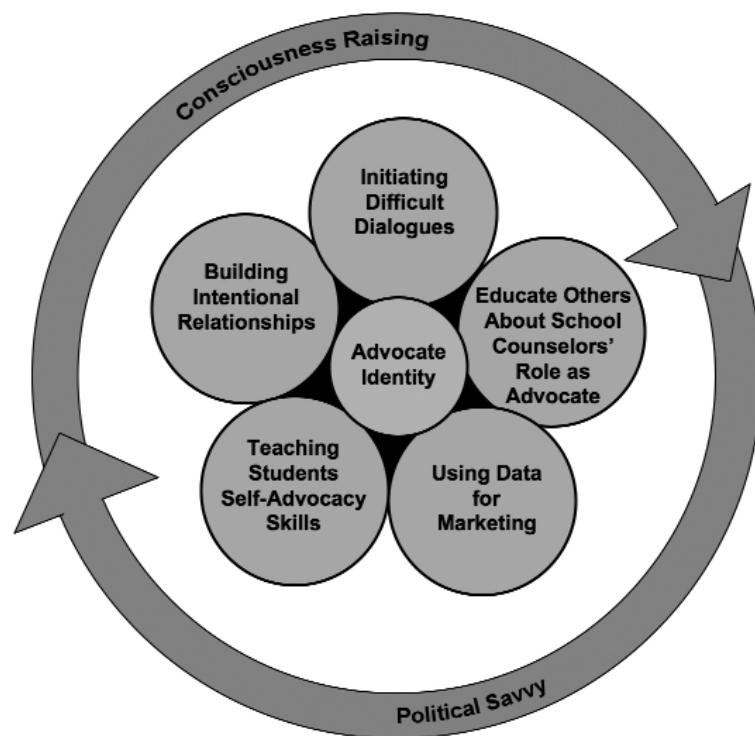
Figure 1. Emergent model of social justice strategies that school counselor advocates use in making systemic change.

egories that related to a common overarching concept and to discern any discrepancies between their discrete codes (Strauss & Corbin).

After each interview was conducted, transcribed, and coded using this codebook, we utilized axial coding to examine the relationship between each of the preestablished categories. During this stage, the research team created higher-level categories based on the data (e.g., "methods of consciousness raising"), thereby contributing to the initial development of a grounded theory of the phenomenon under study. Finally, selective coding was used to refine the theoretical model based on the identification of an overarching core category that accounted for most of the variation in the previously identified categories (e.g., "school counselors' strategies for systemic change"). We reviewed each participant's transcript using the codebook until saturation of findings—where no new data were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 2008)—was attained at participant 14. We decided to interview 2 additional participants to verify saturation of the findings; the total participant pool was 16.

Verification standards and procedures were built into each stage of the research process. Member checking of transcripts, researcher reflexive journals, routine team meetings, the use of multiple data analysts, and peer debriefing were utilized to maximize trustworthiness of findings. We identified thick descriptions of the phenomena to demonstrate credibility of findings. Our immersion in the data for a

year, during which time the research team continually reviewed and coded data as data were collected and analyzed, further strengthened the credibility of findings. Throughout the research process, a school counselor served as an internal auditor by attending research meetings regularly and reviewing the data for accuracy of the coding and theory-building process. An external auditor reviewed the products of the study (i.e., transcripts, research team notes, emergent model) for accuracy. Finally, the research team searched for evidence to disconfirm the emerging theory and modified the theory when necessary to ensure accurate representation of the data.

FINDINGS

We identified seven overarching strategies that participants used as social justice advocates enacting change in their school communities (see Figure 1). These strategies included (a) using political savvy to navigate power structures, (b) consciousness raising, (c) initiating difficult dialogues, (d) building intentional relationships, (e) teaching students self-advocacy skills, (f) using data for marketing, and (g) educating others about the school counselor role of advocate.

Political Savvy and Consciousness Raising
Each of the participants shared that political savvy and consciousness raising were two strategies they used throughout the advocacy process, whereas they

used the remaining five strategies in specific situations and/or during particular stages of the advocacy process. Specifically, political savvy (i.e., knowing when and how to intervene) served as a prerequisite for and an integral part of the other five strategies, each of which served as a distinct way of raising consciousness in the pursuit of systemic change. For example, in order to initiate difficult dialogues, participants described first needing to discern when it was appropriate to speak, how to deliver information in such a way that they could be heard, whom to speak to, and how to strike an appropriate balance between being the "supportive counselor" and the "aggressive change agent." One participant, Kim, shared,

> The truth is you win people to your side by letting them see who you are. You are a warm, intelligent, knowledgeable, forward-thinking person. You don't win people over by running up to them and slapping them with issues. You win them over by getting to know them, by forming teams, and then by respectfully bringing up the issues. … We are political animals. We don't want to say it, but we are. And these situations are very political.

Initiating Difficult Dialogues

All of the participants shared that initiating difficult conversations about social justice issues was a critical strategy used to create change in their schools. Initiating these dialogues involved broaching topics that might make others feel uncomfortable or defensive. Raven shared,

> What you need to be a successful social justice agent in your school is to do what we've been trained to do—to dialogue, to raise awareness, and to ask hard questions. We have to raise awareness throughout the school … so everyone knows how to make change in the classrooms. Like no one can say the "N" word, but you still hear "faggot"—and teachers would let it go or would laugh. I bring that sort of stuff up even though it is tough.

Participants also shared the difficulty they faced in raising concerns with teachers about how students were being treated; this included addressing teachers' assumptions about and stereotyping of students' cultures. In doing so, participants struggled with how they would be perceived by others when they initiated these difficult dialogues. As Joy shared,

> I know there's going to be some backlash, and I hate that—I want everybody to like me. But the truth is that there are going to be some

people [who] aren't going to like me because I'm trying to stand up for what I really believe is right. And I have to be OK with that.

Building Intentional Relationships

All but 2 of the participants shared that they deliberately formed positive working relationships with others in their school communities; these alliances were indispensable to participants as they worked to instigate social change. This relationship-building process included a wide variety of individuals ranging from students, parents, administrators (local and district-level), teachers, and other school counselors to janitors, nurses, social workers, and other key community members. Participants reported that they created broad coalitions of support for macro-level systemic change, while also engaging in micro-level interventions on social justice issues, such as attending to concerns of students of color. For instance, one participant described having built a broad support network across all domains of the school hierarchy, and she reported that she later accessed this support network when a critical social justice issue arose in her school. In this way, she was prepared to act quickly and had established the necessary support to address important issues (e.g., supporting students of color who were being marginalized through testing policies).

Participants viewed everyone in the school as a potential ally. Simone shared,

> For me, the relationship is key. There's not much you can do without having a solid relationship with … just about anybody in the organization. And for training purposes, I think that I would suggest that … school counselor educators focus on encouraging the school counselors to have positive working relationships with principals, administrators, and even district people. Before you can really get anything done, you have to make sure that someone's willing to hear you out. That is the first step in working toward some sort of social change.

Susan echoed this sentiment: "Having the support to talk to other counselors outside of your own building, and also other professionals, is key. I know that the social worker who works with us has been excellent."

Another participant, Samantha, shared,

> I look at everybody as being a key person. … I think to say that there are people [who] are more important to connect with somehow feeds into "the hierarchy," so I look at everybody as an opportunity to connect on social justice.

Teaching Students Self-Advocacy Skills

Each of the participants communicated the importance of teaching students the necessary skills to advocate for themselves, especially when there were seemingly insurmountable barriers to students' development within the home or at school. For instance, one participant specifically reached out to a gay student who was struggling with homophobia within his own family. The participant validated the family stressors in the student's life and connected him with paper and electronic pamphlets containing stories of gay youth managing similar family challenges. In addition to education and validation, the participant then used role-plays to explore ways the gay student could express himself to his family members in order to build self-advocacy skills. Ultimately, this student's parents threatened not to fund his college tuition because he was gay, and the school counselor showed the student how he could search for Internet resources on college scholarships for gay students.

Another participant regularly invested his time to show low-income students how to use the Internet to search for college scholarships and how to navigate admissions processes. School counselors gave students the vocabulary and skills to understand situations and events that were confusing or overwhelming for them. One participant helped her student to understand what student government was and how to become involved. Another participant, Gleaton, shared,

> Sometimes advocating for kids is just helping them to see clear pathways. It's not really getting on the phone with the parents, you know, and saying, "You shouldn't be so down on your kid," because I'm stepping into territory where I may not belong. So advocacy in this particular situation meant advocating for that kid to find his voice. … I think self-advocacy is one of the greatest tools that we can give kids. And teaching kids to advocate for themselves is one of the best things that I can do.

Participants expressed the idea that these self-advocacy skills were part of a critical self-sustaining social justice tool for students, teaching them how to navigate difficult systems within the school, to value their own voice and perspective, and to access educational resources. Kim described the ways in which self-advocacy could facilitate students' liberation:

> I want to be part of a change process that allows students to advocate for themselves, to choose their identity, to be self-determining … and to help them understand how education can be part of their freedom … a part of

the process of getting toward the freedom that they desire for themselves.

Using Data for Marketing

All but one of the participants communicated that it was not sufficient to verbalize the importance of social justice in a general way, and that utilizing data to underscore the significance of specific social justice issues in the school community was a crucial element of their advocacy work. In identifying trends and needs specific to their school and sharing this information with their colleagues and administrators, participants used data to raise consciousness with respect to social justice issues that were otherwise overlooked or dismissed. Star shared,

> I get in there and look at test data and test scores, discipline referrals and attendance patterns and classroom grades—all of those things. You've got to be able to look at it, understand it, analyze it, pull it apart, put it back together, look for trends, and recognize the trends. Placement in accelerated programs and gifted programs is a piece of data that we're always looking at. One of the things that we've discovered in that process is that, [with] our African American males, they are overrepresented in the discipline referrals and underrepresented in the gifted referrals. But when you look at their scores they are eligible for gifted placement. So, you know, that information was out there, and no one was seeing it until we got in there and started messing with numbers.

Educating Others About School Counselors' Role as Advocate

All but 2 of the participants discussed the importance of "good public relations" in terms of marketing their school counselor role as advocate. They also "spread the word" about the specific social justice interventions and initiatives that they were involved in within the school community so that administrators, teachers, parents, students, and other key community members were aware of their advocacy work. Samantha shared,

> A lot of people I work with hang on to the idea of the traditional guidance counselor who sits at a desk and is not part of the whole system but is just sort of peripheral. So, I have to help not only the principals, but teachers too, see the connections between academic performance and developmental issues, social issues, emotional issues and realizing that you can't just attend to one of these areas without the others—that they're intertwined and social justice is an integral part of all these areas.

All of the participants shared that initiating difficult conversations about social justice issues was a critical strategy used to create change in their schools.

Participants noted that educating others about their role as social justice advocates also involved the establishment of professional boundaries. When they were asked to do tasks that deterred them from their advocacy work, for example, they clarified the nature of their role. Amy shared,

I think that first you advocate, and then if you have time for the other things, you do the other things. [Laughter.] But whether it's on a small scale, whether it's with a specific student or with a particular population within the county, that's our number-one role. So if I ever felt like … all my other tasks were really hindering that advocacy, then I'm able to say to my administrators, " Um, I'm really not able to do these things. I really am here to do my area of expertise. …You know, you may want to pull somebody else to do these other things." I've had to do that many times.

DISCUSSION

The voices of the 16 participants in this study provide a grounded theory of how school counselor advocates in this study enacted positive systemic change in their school settings. The school counselors uniformly shared that their social justice advocacy was a political process. They described that they could not claim neutrality and expect social justice change to occur while navigating the complex political systems of their schools. Similarly, they shared that their advocacy often involved the assertion of difficult and at times unpopular positions. In this regard, the study's findings support previous conceptual literature identifying the pressure that school counselors feel to be liked and avoid conflict as a significant barrier to social justice advocacy in schools (Bemak & Chung, 2008). This finding suggests that school counseling training programs should support students in developing skills to anticipate and address the inevitable interpersonal challenges inherent in advocacy work. For example, picking one's battles, knowing whom to speak with and when to speak, and being deliberate in selection of the location, timing, and tenor of conversations were important political considerations that participants in this study negotiated and of which trainees should be aware.

The strategy of building intentional relationships with school community members represents a finding unique to the existing body of school counseling literature. While research exists that documents the significance and nature of the principal–school counselor relationship (Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008; Ponec & Brock, 2000), no studies could be found that address school counselors' deliberate

building of support networks to facilitate the advocacy process. However, the findings of this study suggest that empirical work should build on the existing conceptual literature that advocates for the importance of developing family, school, and community partnerships (Mitchell & Bryant, 2007; Simcox, Nuijens, & Lee, 2006). Participants in the present study discussed the importance of building a coalition composed of individuals at every level of the school community, emphasizing the key role played by each community member. Participants noted that establishment of these relationships facilitated their being heard by key individuals during those times in which they had to initiate difficult dialogues or challenge the status quo. Further, participants discussed having these relationships as beneficial to their personal development as advocates in that their allies often raised their awareness about certain social justice issues. Importantly, having support in their efforts for change kept participants from feeling alone. This finding suggests that training programs should emphasize the importance of building collaborative working relationships with all members of the school community.

The strategies of teaching students self-advocacy skills and using data for marketing both support the school counseling and social justice literature, particularly as it relates to school counselors using the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2003). Specifically, participants' accounts of teaching students self-advocacy skills and of connecting students with the necessary resources to achieve change relate directly to the seven competencies included in the ACA Client/Student Empowerment domain and to the six competencies included in the ACA Client/ Student Advocacy domain. Furthermore, the participants' use of data analysis and presentation to raise individuals' (i.e., teachers, administrators, parents, and community members) awareness of oppressive trends relates directly to Ratts and colleagues' (2007) description of the use of data to reveal areas of need or disparity at the School/ Community level of the ACA Competencies. The participants' focus on teaching students self-advocacy skills and using data for consciousness raising suggests that they are integrating aspects of the ACA Advocacy Competencies into their work as school counselor advocates. This finding suggests that it is vital that training programs integrate these competencies throughout trainees' training experiences, in both a theoretical and an applied manner, in order to prepare them to be successful future school counselor advocates.

With regard to the strategy of educating others about their role as advocates, participants reported that they often had to correct misperceptions concerning the nature of their work and role. School counselors in this study described addressing the

As participants in this study perceived their identity as an advocate as central to their advocacy work, training programs should support trainees in the assessment and development of this identity throughout the training process.

misperception that they held a "traditional guidance counselor" function (i.e., that the majority of their work involved testing and scheduling issues). This finding represents a unique contribution to the school counseling literature. Interestingly, once participants corrected this misunderstanding, many found that members of the school community seemed more respectful both of the professional boundaries that participants set and of the nature of their social justice work. The activity of self-promotion is consistent with previous qualitative findings suggesting that marketing and public relations are important skills for school counselors in effectively implementing programs in their schools (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). While self-promotion and role clarification are important activities for making positive social justice change in a school system, these marketing skills may not come naturally to school counselors and should therefore be emphasized in school counselor training programs.

Limitations of Study

While the present study contributes to the school counseling literature in its identification of the specific strategies used by school counselors advocating for change in their school communities, there are limitations to the study. Although a grounded theory does not seek to generalize the lived experiences of its participants, the relatively homogenous and small sample size limits transferability of findings (Creswell, 2006). Therefore, the findings may be most transferable to school counselors in the Southeastern United States. Also, because the purposive sampling method ensured selection of participants who self-identified and met the criteria of being a successful change agent in schools, this study is restricted in its findings because it did not provide findings about the advocacy experiences of school counselors who do not self-identify as successful and/or advocates. In addition, some of the findings—such as teaching students self-advocacy skills—may or may not be culturally appropriate for students of various cultural backgrounds. Including specific questions about the cultural relevance of the participants' advocacy strategies might have strengthened the findings of this study.

Another limitation involves researcher bias, which is an ongoing concern in qualitative research. The research team worked to address researcher bias and assumptions through the use of reflexive journals, peer debriefing, thick descriptions of participant codes, member checking of the transcripts, and use of an internal and an external auditor. Further, although several methods of verification were used, these methods were not triangulated with other methods and/or evidence that might have corroborated the findings, such as a focus group or participant observations. Ultimately, the grounded theory model represents the lived experiences of the 16 participants in this study and the interpretation of their data by one research team.

Future Practice, Training, and Research Directions

The present study offers several implications for practice, training, and research. In terms of practice and training, several of the participants expressed a desire for school counseling academic programs to work in tandem with school counselors in the field to support advocacy skills training. Participants emphasized the importance of teaching trainees how to initiate difficult dialogues. This type of collaboration could serve as an introduction for trainees to the challenges that school counselors face when navigating power structures within the school community. Practicing school counselors also may benefit from continued education on advocacy work. Further, having a space in which to collaborate with colleagues and trainees about the difficulties and successes of social justice advocacy may be helpful for practicing school counselors. Engaging with others in the profession in this way could invest school counselors with a renewed energy, purpose, and sense of community in their work for social change. This finding is similar to the transformed school counselor preparation encouraged by Hayes and Paisley (2002), who asserted that advocacy must be intentionally used as a guiding principle undergirding program assumptions and rationales, curriculum topics and structure, methodologies of teaching, and evaluation of programs in order to train transformed school counselors.

In the training of school counselors, practicum and internship supervision could benefit from focusing on how students see themselves using the seven strategies in this study in their practice settings. The participants in this study communicated that they did not receive the necessary social justice training to be effective change agents during their programs, which is consistent with previous research (Kircher, 2007; Ratts, 2006). School counseling programs should consider not only using the ASCA National Model, but also infusing the ACA advocacy and multicultural competencies throughout students' training. Further, as participants in this study perceived their identity as an advocate as central to their advocacy work, training programs should support trainees in the assessment and development of this identity throughout the training process. Specifically, this role could be introduced in early classes and the practice of advocacy could be assessed during trainees' clinical experiences in order to increase preparedness, accountability, and growth. It is also important for graduate training programs to help students learn how best to promote their advocacy

> **Because self-advocacy skills are grounded in a value of the individual, school counselors should endeavor to assess the cultural appropriateness of this strategy with each student with whom they work.**

role within the school system using different methods (e.g., initiating conversations, presenting data, sharing the ASCA National Model, using creativity). Because there are important social justice initiatives that heavily involve school counselors, such as the TSCI and the Education Trust's work on reducing the achievement gap, educators may connect graduate students with this work to promote training in advocacy practice and research.

With regard to research, this study contributes to the literature in its focus on the lived experiences of school counselor advocates. The subjective nature of the phenomenon of inquiry (i.e., social justice advocacy of school counselors) indicates that the grounded theory paradigm was the most appropriate approach for this study. This approach provided an in-depth understanding of the advocacy strategies that current school counselor advocates use in their daily practice of advocacy. The importance of having an internal auditor who is presently working as a school counselor constituted an important measure of accountability in the research process. It is suggested that future grounded theory inquiries in school counseling consider this verification standard. Future research on the model identified in this study could explore more deeply each of the seven advocacy strategies (e.g., "How can school counselor training programs effectively teach political savvy?") in addition to examining potential interstrategy relationships (e.g., "How does building relationships with school community members impact reactions to difficult dialogues?"). Finally, because the participants discussed continued pressure to assume administrative duties that impeded their ability to engage in advocacy, future research may examine how school counselor advocates can set boundaries and protect their advocacy roles.

School Counselor Social Justice Training Checklist for School Counseling Programs

Because of the critical need for social justice training in school counseling programs, in this section we provide a checklist that school counselor educators can use when teaching social justice strategies to students. This checklist is based on the findings of the present study.

1. Teach political savvy and consciousness-raising skills for advocacy: Help school counselor trainees to learn how to navigate complex school system politics. Political savvy assists school counselors in knowing when and how to intervene while consciousness-raising skills provide specific methods to increase school community members' awareness of their goals, motives, and actions in the pursuit of systemic change.
2. Develop skills in initiating difficult dialogues on

social justice issues: Use a variety of creative, deliberate, and empathic approaches to connect with others who may have opposing views on social justice or who are resistant to change. Help trainees to understand that social justice dialogues are often ongoing and require patience, courage, and understanding of intense emotions such as anger and fear.
3. Understand how to use community mapping to build relationships: Use creative methods to identify the "key players" and important community members with whom school counselors will need to build intentional relationships in order to gain support, prevent isolation and burnout, and, ultimately, implement change.
4. Highlight self-advocacy skills in training: School counseling trainees may already have natural skills in self-advocacy based on their own life experiences. Counselor educators may explore these skills, highlighting trainees' experiences with social justice action, to promote an understanding of self-advocacy skills that trainees can then teach to students. Because self-advocacy skills are grounded in a value of the individual, school counselors should endeavor to assess the cultural appropriateness of this strategy with each student with whom they work.
5. Teach data collection, analysis, and communication methods to support social justice change: Social justice advocacy seeks to disrupt the status quo, which can be uncomfortable for many individuals. One of the most powerful ways of educating people about injustices involves collecting data and analyzing and communicating trends that are grounded in that data. Although opponents can deny school counselors' opinions and anecdotal observations, it is much more difficult to deny data trends.
6. Develop professional advocacy skills to maximize "buy-in": Social justice change involves deliberate efforts to educate others about the important school counselor role of advocate. Practicing the setting of boundaries and the delivery of accurate information about school counselor advocacy roles will help school community members to better understand, support, and utilize these roles.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a unique opportunity to capture the rich experiences of 16 school counselor advocates committed to social justice change. Their voices provide insight into the awareness, knowledge, and skills that school counselors need to navigate a complicated school system, to manage resistance to social justice, and to leverage resources on behalf of historically marginalized students. The findings lend

support to the further integration of advocacy competence in school counselor training, practice, and scholarship. Finally, the social justice training checklist for school counseling programs is grounded in the findings and provides specific direction and action steps school counselor educators can take to more fully prepare effective school counseling trainees for social justice action in schools. ∎

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions for Self-Identified
Successful School Counselor Advocates

1. What is social justice to you? What is advocacy to you?

2. What recommendations would you suggest to help training programs adequately prepare trainees to serve as social justice change agents in their roles as school counselors?

3. How prepared have you felt to serve as a social justice agent in your school (e.g., awareness, necessary skills, support)?

4. What helps you to be a successful social justice change agent in your school?

5. What types of social justice–related issues do you see in your school?

6. What social justice interventions would you like to see in your school?

7. How have you served as a successful social justice agent in your school community? For example: How have these experiences been for you? Resources? Roadblocks? Other information you would like to share?

8. Who are the key people, if any, in your school whom you work with on issues related to social justice?

9. What are students' typical responses to social justice interventions?

10. What are parents' typical responses to social justice interventions?

11. What is the community's typical response to social justice interventions?

12. Is there any other information you would like to add related to your experiences with social justice as a school counselor advocate?