

**School Counselors' Constructions of Student Confidentiality**

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### **Abstract**

Confidentiality in counseling relationships helps ensure trust between clients and counselors. Yet, defining and understanding the boundaries of confidentiality in school settings is often difficult, as school counselors are engaged in multiple relationships with various stakeholders. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the experiences of nine practicing school counselors to answer the following two research questions: 1) how do professional school counselors respond to ethical issues related to student confidentiality as they perform their responsibilities within the school community? And, 2) how do school counselors believe members of the school community perceive student confidentiality? Upon analysis, two main themes emerged from participants' narratives: relationships and training. Subthemes were also present for each of the two main themes. Under relationships, subthemes include trust, school culture, teamwork and consultation. Under training, subthemes of graduate training, professional development, and experience emerged. Implications for counselor educators and school counseling graduate programs are discussed.

*Keywords:* confidentiality, ethics, school counselors, counselor education

## **School Counselors' Constructions of Student Confidentiality**

The present study qualitatively explores the phenomenon of how school counselors perceive and address ethical boundaries regarding student confidentiality with school personnel, which includes teachers and administrators. Although research has explored student confidentiality and school counselors' obligations to parents (Bodenhorn, 2006; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Davis & Mickelson, 1994; Isaacs & Stone, 1999; Lazovsky, 2008; Moyer & Sullivan, 2008), limited research has addressed the gray areas of student confidentiality and school personnel. As members of the school community (school faculty and staff), professional school counselors are naturally part of a team of teachers and administrators striving to help students succeed. Yet, school counselors have a "primary obligation to students" (ASCA, 2010) and are in a "critical position of trust" (ASCA, 2010).

Trust is considered to be a "cornerstone of the counseling relationship" (ACA, 2005). Confidentiality in counseling relationships helps ensure trust between clients and counselors. Yet, defining and understanding confidentiality in school settings is often difficult, because school counselors are often engaged in multiple relationships with students, school faculty, school staff, and parents. Professional school counselors support the academic, personal/social, and career development of students in K-12 school settings. Confidentiality in school communities is a complex issue (Glosoff & Pate, 2002). School counselors consult with teachers, parents, and school administrators on academic and child behavioral matters. School counselors often struggle with a balancing act as they maneuver between students, parents, and school systems (Glosoff & Pate).

## **Ethical Responsibilities**

Professional school counselors must be aware of the boundaries of their legal and professional roles and ethical responsibilities, especially to understand the exceptions to confidentiality, and when a breach of confidentiality may be justified. According to the Code of Ethics of the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) and the American School Counselor Association's Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2010), school counselors are expected to protect student confidentiality unless information is deemed to be of serious and foreseeable harm to the student or to others, or it is legally required to breach confidentiality. The important roles that school faculty play in a student's academic and personal/social development are recognized as well as a school counselor's responsibility to provide school faculty with "accurate, objective, concise and meaningful data necessary to adequately evaluate, counsel and assist the student" (ASCA). Thus, professional school counselors have the difficult, often isolating task in determining which aspects of student information can be defined as necessary to reveal to school faculty.

Most school counselors are provided with training in ethics as related to confidentiality during their master's degree programs. As part of counselor education, Counselor Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) guidelines require that master's degree school counseling students obtain knowledge of "ethical and legal considerations specifically related to the practice of school counseling (2009). After beginning professional practice, school counselors are expected to continue to refer to the ethics guidelines of ACA and ASCA in order to stay up-to-date and comply with the most recent ethical codes. Yet, a recent study reported that many

school counselors do not refer to ethical codes as part of their practice after graduating from a counselor education program (Bodenhorn, 2006).

Ethics are concerned with actions and practice, with what one ought to do (Pojman & Fieser, 2012). Walker (1995) reported on the ethical quandaries that arise for school principals dealing with the competing interests of the school faculty, students, and invested community as well as their own sense of personal integrity in relation to confidentiality. School counselors face similar ethical issues every day and also extend their roles into more complex relationships with students. However, virtually no comparable research has been conducted with professional school counselors. In order to explore the phenomenon of how professional school counselors determine which and how much student information to share with school personnel, qualitative methodology was utilized.

### **Confidentiality**

Previous literature has emphasized the importance of educating parents and students about the concept of confidentiality (Huss, Bryant, & Mulet 2008). Educating school principals and other administrators is vital to the understanding and protection of student confidentiality (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Huss et al. (2008) recommend signed management agreements for both parents and administrators that describe confidentiality and privacy as outlined in the ASCA National Model (2012).

A recent survey of secondary school counselors' perceptions of ethical boundaries of confidentiality indicated that school counselors are more likely to break confidentiality and notify parents when student behaviors are more intense, more frequent, and of longer duration than typical student behavior, although there was

considerable variance regarding perceived dangerousness of these behaviors (Moyer & Sullivan, 2008). Bodenhorn's (2006) survey of K-12 Virginia school counselors found issues of student confidentiality, parent's right to knowledge about their child, dual relationships with faculty, and deciding whether to act on knowledge of dangerous student behavior to be the most common and challenging ethical dilemmas. Stone and Isaacs (2003) recommend additional school policies regarding student confidentiality in order to protect both students and school counselors. While these studies have begun to shed light on an important topic, no studies to date have specifically explored school counselors' attitudes and behaviors regarding student confidentiality and collaboration with other school personnel such as teachers and administrators. Qualitative research methodology can illuminate the unique experiences of school counselors in their own words.

## **Procedure**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to seek and describe school counselors' constructions of ethical boundaries regarding student confidentiality with school personnel. Phenomenological research involves collecting data from the lived experiences of a group of individuals in order to develop a composite description of a particular phenomenon that participants have in common, such as interpretations and constructions of student confidentiality as investigated in the current study (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research methods enable participants to reveal their true, unique voices and experiences. The present study was framed within a phenomenological paradigm, which employs naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A phenomenological paradigm is fitting for this study, as the phenomenon of how professional school counselors personally interpret, construct, and apply confidentiality within the school setting is explored. Rather than a broad, wide-ranging approach, a phenomenological approach is designed to uncover and explore rich, deep information about the specific phenomenon of study. Phenomenological research employs techniques such as interviews and discussions, in which data are collected, analyzed and coded for themes, and organized into meaningful information units (Creswell, 2007). The research questions explored in this qualitative, phenomenological study included:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do professional school counselors respond to ethical issues related to student confidentiality, as they perform their responsibilities within the school community?
2. How do school counselors believe members of the school community perceive student confidentiality?

### **Participants**

Criterion sampling was used to select the participants. Criteria for participation in this study included full time employment as a professional school counselor at an elementary, middle, or secondary public school. Volunteer participants responded to an email submitted to professional school counselors working at elementary, middle, and secondary public school systems within a three-hour radius of the institution of the primary researcher.

Professional school counselors interested in participating in this study on school counselors and confidentiality were instructed to request more information about the study by email or phone. Those who indicated interest received a packet of information explaining the purpose of the research and the informed consent (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that their involvement in the research was voluntary and that they could terminate their involvement in the study at any time. All participants signed the informed consent documents and all procedures followed those established by the Institutional Review Board of the University associated with this study.

Qualitative sample sizes should be small enough to gather in-depth information (Sandelowski, 1995) and large enough to achieve saturation (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Creswell (2007) recommends a sample size of less than ten participants in phenomenological research. Participants in the current study were contacted and selected until a sample was reached that met the preceding criteria. The resulting sample consisted of nine professional school counselors. Three worked at the elementary school level, three worked at the middle school level, and three worked at the secondary school level. Four participants worked at schools in suburban settings. Three participants worked at schools in rural settings. Two participants worked at schools in urban areas. Of the nine participants, two were male and seven were female. Two participants identified as African American and seven identified as Caucasian. Participants' length of time as school counselors ranged from three to twenty-eight years (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>School Level</b>	<b>School Setting</b>
Eileen	Female	Caucasian	4	Elementary	Rural
Mary	Female	Caucasian	15	Elementary	Suburban
Katherine	Female	Caucasian	2	Elementary	Urban
Heather	Female	Caucasian	3	Middle	Suburban
Lynn	Female	Caucasian	12	Middle	Rural
Trina	Female	African-American	5	Secondary	Urban
Randy	Male	Caucasian	14	Secondary	Rural
Michael	Male	African-American	10	Secondary	Suburban
John	Male	Caucasian	28	Secondary	Suburban

**Researcher as Instrument**

In phenomenological research, it is essential for researchers to be aware of their personal biases in relation to the research topic and how these biases might affect research outcomes (Morrow, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). The researchers included one female counselor educator and one female doctoral student in counselor education. Both researchers have experience in practice as professional school counselors. The researchers attempted to be aware of and kept field note journals of their perceptions and reflections related to the participants' experiences. In addition, the researchers met weekly with the peer reviewer, a counselor educator with experience as a professional school counselor, who assisted the researchers by reflecting, clarifying, and reviewing the data and emerging themes of the study.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the rigor of the study and to the persuasion that the details and findings of the study are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Representing the

authentic voices of the participants was vital to the credibility of the study. The credibility or believability of this study was confirmed by the fact that the researchers explored what they stated as the purpose of the study—professional school counselors’ constructions of confidentiality with school personnel. The peer reviewer and the use of member checking contributed to the credibility of the study. The descriptions provided by the participants offered an in-depth look at the experiences and perceptions of this sample of nine professional school counselors. These rich, thick descriptions contributed to the transferability of this study, which increased the likelihood that similar themes would emerge from a comparable sample. In order to provide dependability in this qualitative study, the researchers maintained an audit trail throughout the study by maintaining careful records and safekeeping of data as previously described. In order to preserve the confirmability of this study, the audit trail maintained throughout the study included the project proposal, the International Review Board Protocol Form, transcripts, field notes, member checking, researcher notes, peer reviewer notes, and charts.

## **Method**

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional school counselors employed at public elementary, middle, and secondary schools in local school divisions within a three-hour radius. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. Participants’ real names and contact information were only used for scheduling purposes and sending transcripts. The personal identification information was kept separate and secure.

The participant interviews were designed according to Creswell's (2007) recommendations of broad, open-ended questions in qualitative inquiry and included questions regarding participants' perceptions and constructions of student confidentiality with school personnel (see Appendix C). Participants were given the option to meet face-to-face for the interviews or to participate in the interviews by phone. Three participants chose face-to-face interviews. These interviews were conducted in a location of the participants' choice. Two chose coffee shops, one chose to meet in the school setting. Six participants chose to participate in the interviews by phone. The interviews lasted for approximately one hour. Participants were encouraged to talk about their experiences with student confidentiality and school faculty and staff. The process was nondirective and open-ended. Participant interviews were digitally recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell's (2007) three-stage strategy was followed in analyzing the data: 1) prepare and organize data; 2) reduce the data into themes; and 3) represent the data.

Prepare and organize data. All transcripts were fully transcribed by the researchers. Throughout the interview process and during data analysis, the researchers kept field note journals in order to record date and time of interview as well as information that was difficult to capture through an audio recording such as participants' affective responses. Transcriptions, field notes, digital recordings were stored on disc and thumb drive and stored in a confidential, locked file. Only pseudonyms were used in interviews and in field notes. After the interviews were transcribed, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts to validate

participating responses and ensure that their stories were told accurately and completely. Participants' transcripts were sent to them via e-mail. No participants reported any inaccurate information found in their transcripts.

Reduce the data into themes. Following the transcriptions of the interviews, the researchers began the process of analysis through data immersion in which the researchers engaged in readings and re-readings of field notes and transcripts. The researchers highlighted data or "significant sentences" that revealed instances, examples, or explanations of the phenomenon at study, participants' constructions and perceptions of student confidentiality (Creswell 2007).

The researchers met weekly throughout the duration of the study. They discussed the data, the coded and highlighted data, the emerging themes, and the emerging sub-themes of the study. A peer reviewer, a counselor educator with over seven years' school counseling experience, had access to the participants' transcripts for the purpose of confirmability. The peer reviewer helped clarify and confirm the emergence and meaning of the themes and subthemes.

Represent the data. As themes emerged from the data, the researchers began to attach codes to the data that represented the emerging themes. After displaying all themes, the researchers questioned and verified themes with data, resulting in a narrowing of the data into two main themes: "Relationships" and "Training."

### **Discussion and Results**

The two main themes, Relationships and Training, included distinct subthemes. Within the theme of Relationships, subthemes of trust, school culture, teamwork, and

consultation emerged. Within the theme of Training, subthemes of graduate training, professional development, and experience emerged.

## **Relationships**

Throughout the interviews, a strong theme of relationships was present. Participants described professional relationships with many different stakeholders: school principals, assistant principals, school psychologists, school social workers, resource officers, school nurses, other counselors both in the school system and in private practice, district personnel, students' parents, families and community as a whole. While some participants viewed these relationships in an antagonistic way, as ones that challenged the ethical boundary of confidentiality, other participants saw these relationships as essential to supporting the needs of students and promoting student success. All participants expressed a consideration for the broader context of stakeholder relationships within the school setting in deciding who to consult with and what information to share. Descriptions of the four subthemes, (trust, school culture, teamwork, and consultation) within the theme of relationships, can be found in the following sections.

**Trust.** A thread of trust ran throughout participant's narratives as they described their decision-making process in determining with whom to share student information. Participants revealed that they disclosed student information more frequently and of a more revealing nature to teachers and other stakeholders whom they believed would use the information in a professional manner. Conversely, participants shared less information with those they deemed untrustworthy. Along these lines, middle school counselor Katherine, commented, "See, it's hard to know exactly how to define it

because, like I said, it's different for every teacher, how much I'll share. Like I said, I think it's the teachers who (use the information) in a nurturing way that I tend to tell more."

Nearly all participants noted that any student information shared with colleagues was information they deemed necessary for students' well-being. However, it appeared in multiple cases that the school counselors' determinations of what a school professional needed to know was significantly influenced (or, perhaps superseded) by the degree of trust the school counselor had with the particular person. As high school counselor John stated, "There are some [teachers], that, because of my relationship, I can trust with some information." Similarly, another participant stated, "...I really feel like my teachers were generally pretty trustworthy with what I shared with them." She went on to explain that the relationships she has with teachers and her beliefs about how teachers will use the information she shares significantly impact the level of trust she has with them, which, in turn, influences what she tells them and what information she may withhold.

Degree of trust was determined in different ways among participants: some described past experiences with school professionals who used confidential student information in either an appropriate way to support and nurture the student, thus reinforcing the school counselor's trust in sharing information in the future. Middle school counselor Katherine described her personal expectations of teachers' reactions to sensitive student information:

Do I feel the need to tell a teacher why the kid was acting up? I think in a situation like that, it probably depends on the teacher...if I thought that

teacher was going to go, 'poor kid, what can I do to help?' Alright, then maybe I would. Otherwise I might just tell them...that the kid was having a bad day.

Others described experiences where school professionals used confidential student information in inappropriate, unprofessional ways, which reduced the level of trust. Examples included overhearing teacher sharing gossip about students in the teacher workroom and teachers who shared confidential information about other co-workers or school families at off campus sites such as grocery stores or social gatherings. One counselor relayed a negative experience with a teacher who shared personal complaints and gossip about another teacher to other school professionals. In turn, from that point, the counselor censored information that she shared with this teacher, believing that it was likely that information would not be kept confidential.

Trust was also discussed regarding the perceived level of trust that a school official has for the professional school counselor[A1]. One secondary school counselor relayed his strong working relationship with school administrators, which, over time, led to a mutual trust. He said, "Because of age and experience there's a build-up of 'He knows what he's doing. It's going to be okay, and I'm glad it's off my back.'" In this counselor's experience, school administrators rarely questioned or micromanaged his decisions regarding confidentiality and often looked to him and referred to him as a school leader. Similarly, Mary, discussed the trust that the school staff had in her, and their belief that she would protect sensitive information. Mary stated, "I really had a great rapport with the teachers... [For example, if] one of my students drew a picture with knives or attacking somebody else, and the art teacher brought it to me... I didn't

feel like I necessarily had to follow up with her because she knew that I would handle it from there.”

**School culture.** Participants discussed school culture and expectations regarding the sharing of student information. School culture and expectations greatly differed among the schools represented. Participants’ stories revealed difficulties in protecting student information while working within the parameters of a particular school’s framework. Protocol at some schools required school counselors to share all information pertaining to student discipline or academic issues with school administration. Administrators at other schools took a more laissez-faire approach, allowing school counselors to use their own discretion in deciding when to share student information and with whom. Some schools did not have a clearly defined protocol for reporting confidential information to school administration. Participants described both positive and negative aspects of each approach.

High school counselor John clearly described his school’s policy of weekly administrative meetings with the school counselors, assistant principals and school principal to discuss student issues:

We meet once a week in the conference room and we have data in front of us: discipline, grades, absences...and then we just kind of talk about students who, for any number of reasons, are (struggling)...if (our other counselors) want to be vague with them then, they’re very good about letting us be vague about the kids. They allow us to give them some insight, but it doesn’t always have to be everything.

John described his understanding of the expectations at his school in wholly positive terms. While his expectations at these weekly meetings were to share student information, his administration understood and respected when he withheld information. John pointed out several instances where a student or a parent specifically asked that information be kept confidential, and though his administrator knew that he was working with the family, she respected the confidential nature of his relationship with the family.

Some participants found solace in school policies or unwritten expectations, which require school counselors to share particular student information with other school officials. Annie, a secondary school counselor stated, "...when something's going on with my students I feel like my administrator needs to know...the parents may contact them and...if they come back to me and say 'why didn't you tell me about this?'...I feel like I have to keep them in the loop."

One middle school counselor stated, "I'm pretty flexible as far as what I share with administrators or teachers just because I feel like...they are right on the front lines with the kid and have been working with them more than I get a chance to. And a lot of times I think information that I share really is relevant to their work with the kids." In a similar vein, elementary school counselor Heather shared that she believes that school administrators should be informed of student issues "because it's their school, their kids..."

Many of these school protocols regarding dissemination of student information were unwritten, but widely practiced and assumed within the school. Most participants revealed that they informed their school administrators before reporting cases of suspected abuse or neglect to Child Protective Services (CPS). Michael, a secondary

counselor stated that he provides his administrator with a report, which must be signed before he calls CPS. Katherine, a middle school counselor, stated, “there isn’t anything in the policy that I must tell my administrator before making a call, necessarily. But I think that’s just something that our principal has put out there that’s how it should be done. And I usually do trust her with details.” Katherine felt that it was important to follow the expectations laid out by school leadership. Similarly, Eileen, an elementary school counselor stated that her principal expected to be informed of any CPS reports.

**Consultation.** Participants revealed a common reliance upon consultation with other mental health professionals. Consultation provided many school counselors with assurance that they were acting congruently with common standards of practice. While most consulted with other school counselors and school psychologist within their school building or school district, some looked outside their immediate workplace or even outside the field of school counseling for consultation. The following excerpt from Randy’s interview describes the professional support that consultation with others in the field can provide:

I obviously didn’t share the student’s name, but I did share the situation because I think you kind of want reassurance that you’re doing it right...Whether it’s a phone call to another counselor or something like that, the only person who knows what a school counselor does is another school counselor...and I think that it’s one thing to share that without names and places and dates but just kind of the situation...There’s reassurance that people handle things similarly.

All counselors reported some level of consultation to some degree with other mental health professionals or school administrators. Counselors' perceptions of available consultants seemed to differ, depending on the school level or geographic location of their school. Of the participants interviewed, middle and secondary school counselors reported more availability of school counseling consultants compared to elementary school counselors. These different reports are not surprising, as most elementary schools have fewer school counselors than secondary schools, with a higher ratio of students to counselors.

Mary, an elementary school counselor discussed the isolating experience of working as the sole school counselor in an elementary school and the importance she found in consulting with other counselors in the school district. The school system in which Mary is employed has monthly district-wide counseling meetings, which she uses to discuss current counseling issues and to consult with other counselors. As she reported, consultation with other school counselors has brought her a sense of camaraderie as a professional, helped her to grow as a school counselor, and has given her a sense of confidence in her counseling skills: "...the school day was kind of lonely in terms of having other adults and that's why I felt that the counselor meetings were so valuable because you had contact with other counselors and [could] talk about issues that you [were] dealing with..."

Similarly, Eileen, an elementary school counselor shared the problems she faced when seeking assistance or consultation. As the only counselor in her elementary school, she shared, "I feel like I don't have a go-to person about things like confidentiality." Eileen explained that the only person in her school building that she

consulted with on a regular basis was the school psychologist, but noted that this was difficult as the school psychologist worked at two different schools and was often not available. Eileen stated that she calls other school counselors at other elementary schools to ask, "Hey, what do you think? How would you handle this situation? This is what I was thinking...do you think that's okay" when dealing with difficult situations.

In contrast to elementary school counselors who have limited mental health professionals in their buildings with whom they can consult, Randy, John, Lynn, Michael, and Trina, middle and secondary counselors, stressed the benefits of consulting with counselors and administrators in their buildings. Trina stated, "I think that if there's anyone in our school that I feel that I could go to... and expect them to be confidential would be my co-counselors and then the administration that I work with." Middle school counselor Lynn stated, "[I] always consult with other counselors, always, always, always...or my assistant principal... and sometimes our school social worker." John, as the lead counselor at his school, stated that he consults with the school psychologists and school administrators when dealing with difficult situations. As lead counselor, he has created an environment where the other school counselors are encouraged to consult with him in difficult situations. John described how he works with the school counselors in his building in the following excerpt:

I'll say, 'What do you think you should do?' They'll give me they're answer, and I'll say, 'That's fine' or 'Have you thought about this?' If things are going to get really messy, I can sit in on a session. We'll try to make a plan for a case. I feel it's my responsibility as lead counselor to be available to them, to help them. If I have a new person, I'll work with them quite a bit.

**Teamwork.** Participants emphasized the belief that effective student support was best handled using a team approach. Participants referred to members of their counseling department as part of their team as well as other school professionals including school administrators, teachers, nurses, and resource officers. Negative and positive experiences in using a team approach were shared.

Michael, a secondary school counselor, stressed the importance of working with a variety of school personnel to utilize their unique perspective and resources to help students. He provided a real-life example of a student struggling with suicidal ideation. With the student's permission, Michael collaborated with the nurse and a school administrator, in addition to contacting her parents due to the concern about her health and safety. In this case, multiple school professionals were utilized to support the student from different angles. Trina, a secondary school counselor, also discussed revealing student information to administrators due to the fact that "their disciplinary actions possibly may impact what's going on at home. You know, so if they know that mom and dad [are] fighting or whatever, like, "ok, I understand this. I'll give him ISS instead of OSS." As part of her job description, she attends student discipline meetings. She found that the information that she was able to offer about a student's home life and personal struggles, provided school administration with a more holistic view of the student, and helped administration make more equitable disciplinary decisions that were based not only on punishment, but on supporting the student's needs.

Another participant, Randy, reiterated the theme of teamwork, and pointed to the shared sense of investment among education professionals in providing the best

possible support for students. Randy described his view of teamwork in the following statement:

[M]y kind of rule of thumb, and I think it's a good one to follow, is... there's a lot of people here who want to help a kid... And they are part of a team to help make a kid successful in school. So, to share that with a teacher, or at least with an administrator, or even if it's vague, I guess my logic is that it's going to help the student in the big picture.

Similarly, Lynn, a middle school counselor with over twelve years' experience stated, "It is my professional judgment that in a school setting in working with a child and in working with other people who are pretty much the caregivers of the child with their teachers, their immediate teachers and also the assistant principal. I would definitely share information."

Participants also shared negative aspects of a team approach. Lynn discussed the importance in getting to know school faculty because of the risk of sharing information with someone who might not keep the information confidential. Eileen, an elementary school counselor, expressed frustration in working as a team in that teachers often wanted confidential information about students they referred to school counseling. While she provided vague statements such as 'Well, there's just some things going on at home right now," she pointed out that she often had to remind teachers about confidentiality. Eileen stated;

... I find myself reminding teachers about confidentiality a lot because that's where my concern comes in, is that, like hallway talk and that sort of thing...For example, if I have a student in...my office, and the teacher has

sent them to me...the teacher will meet me in the hall because they want to know what the child said. They want to know what's going on. And that's a breach of confidentiality. They don't need to know every detail.

## **Training**

Training emerged as a second major theme across the participants' narratives. Participants spoke of their own training in graduate school counseling programs and the presence, or lack, of ongoing professional development training in their school districts or through outside opportunities. Participants also spoke of the training received by other educators in their building and how that training informed their colleagues' understanding of the role of a school counselor. Descriptions of the three subthemes (graduate training, professional development, and experience) within the main theme of Training can be found in the following sections.

**Graduate training.** All ten participants spoke of a "discrepancy" between what is taught in masters-level school counseling programs and the "realities" of the profession. As one high school counselor stated: "There's definitely a discrepancy between what you learn in your program and how it's actually carried out whenever you start working." Katherine, an elementary school counselor, was first confronted with these discrepancies during her internship in school counseling. While she felt somewhat prepared by her professors, she still faced challenges. She stated,

When I first came into counseling I felt... like we had talked so much about ethics and confidentiality in our coursework and I just felt very strong in believing that I should always maintain confidentiality in any situation that I can. But then when I started my internship... and worked with a

counselor...and I very much admired his work, he kind of laid it out to me in that you really have to be flexible and a lot of the time the teachers are the ones that often need to know what's going on as long as they look at it as a way of having to maintain confidentiality.

Katherine said that she believes that learning to adapt to the demands of the job and to understand the realities of working as a school counselor were important lessons that helped her become a more effective school counselor.

Eileen, an elementary school counselor, also spoke of her surprise over what was actually practiced in the field, despite forewarning from her professors: "...I think they [professors] were accurate in some of their warnings, but I still feel like there was a discrepancy between how it is really practiced in the school and how they taught us to practice it because unfortunately, again, you know, going back to that 'need to know' basis." As with Katherine, Eileen spoke of this as a challenge for her to overcome, but also seemed to interpret the reality of her experiences as a school counselor as part of her professional growth.

Many participants discussed the difficulty in determining when and how to share information with school faculty. Secondary school counselor Trina discussed how the reality of the experience is different than simply hearing about it in graduate school. Trina stated, "sometimes it's hard because...I may be out of the office for one day...I feel like I have to keep someone in the loop in case I'm not there, I'm in a meeting, something blows up. It's just all these little factors that you don't think about when you're going through grad school."

**Professional development.** Professional development opportunities varied greatly among participants. Mary, who is also a licensed professional counselor (LPC), discussed her continuing education and training requirements to maintain her state license. An element of this training is an annual review of counseling ethical codes, to which she commented: "...It has been helpful as an LPC to have to do the training in ethics each year." She also discussed the application of the ASCA code in her school system in stating, "...I think the ASCA code is obviously more applicable to what we're doing in schools... but I never went over that in a county counselors' meeting." Mary expressed frustration that the professional development she received from her district was intended for teachers and other classroom educators, but never specifically for school counselors.

According to participants interviewed, professional development for school counselors in school systems seldom revolved around issues related to ethics codes in counseling, or even counseling in general. Like Mary, Eileen expressed frustration in that much of the training in the school system was related to issues in teaching rather than counseling in stating, "...in my county...we don't have a director of guidance... there's never really been much for counselors; they're doing presentations on testing and reading strategies, not confidentiality." Similarly, middle school counselor Lynn found her district meetings, which are led by a school professional with no counseling experience, to be ineffective. She expressed her wishes for a director of counseling and meaningful meetings for school counselors. When asked what would make her job easier, Lynn answered without hesitation,

There are two areas in which I wish we had more support. I would love a director of guidance at the county level. That would just be a wonderful resource to have... and a great person to talk with and consult with...and I do wish that we could consult more with other counselors...

The request for support from a position such as that of a district level director of school counseling was reiterated by multiple participants as a way to better support the professional needs of school counselors. Yet even in school districts with directors of counseling, most participants revealed a lack of professional development opportunities specifically tailored for counselors. Secondary school counselor Trina stated, "...the things we talk about mostly [are] graduation requirements, new regulations...and stuff like that...Sometimes we have professional development days, but it's still not a chance for us to talk about what's going on in our school."

With a common lack of professional development opportunities available within their districts, some participants, such as Mary described above, look to other sources for training. With one exception (Mary, the sole LPC), participants divulged that they seldom (if ever) consult counseling ethical codes as a practicing school counselor. Participants had similar reasons for not utilizing the counseling ethical codes: most felt that the ethical codes did not adequately account for the context of the school. As an example, Randy, a high school counselor with over 18 years' experience said:

I'll just be honest, I haven't really referred back to them (professional ethical codes) since my graduate program. Because when you're working and you're in your field, it's a totally different ballgame and you play by the rules of your administration and your administrator and, you know, they

don't want to hear about your ASCA national model or the state school counselor's program standards and they don't want to hear about the social domain and whatever else. They want to do what works for their school.

In addition to their own professional development, some participants described a sense of responsibility to educate their school's faculty and staff on the role of a school counselor and the concept of confidentiality. Multiple participants found that their school colleagues were unaware of the parameters of student confidentiality, the development of a counseling relationship, and how that relationship can be used to support student learning and development. With varying degrees of success, participants described utilizing times throughout the school year, such as teacher orientation and faculty meetings, to explain the role of professional school counselors. One counselor described her experience in providing information for her school's faculty in stating, "I did a faculty in-service to let them (the teachers) know what a school counselor's role is and what services we provide, how we can help the teachers...just kind of a general understanding. I'm not sure that the teachers understand everything that I do."

Several other participants spoke of proactively educating school staff, students, and parents regarding the importance of a strong counseling relationship to elicit a change in expectations surrounding the parameters of confidentiality. Heather, an elementary school counselor stated that she reiterated the message and meaning of confidentiality with students throughout the school year. She said, "I always... (discuss confidentiality) individually... but also at the beginning of the year I do a sort of 'rules of

the counselor' intro lesson...I would always say to them, 'What's the deal with confidentiality? Why am I someone they should feel safe with?'

Trina, a secondary school counselor, found the defining of her role to be a daunting task when she moved to a different school: "It was tough in the beginning. I think they gradually understood that what my role was as we worked together throughout the year." For her, consistency within her school counseling office, and a sense that the other school counselors were "on the same page" as her was key in easing her transition to the new school. Some participants found the task of educating their colleagues easier if they followed a counselor who created a firm foundation regarding the role of professional school counselors. Heather, an elementary school counselor, said, "I think there were a few teachers who kind of got it because the previous counselor had been there for a while."

**Experience.** Experience in the field, as a professional school counselor, seemed to influence participants' views of confidentiality with students. Lynn, a middle school counselor described the difference between the way she and a new school counselor interpret the need to share information with school faculty. She stated, "I've been doing this for eleven years and then [my co-worker] had just gotten out of grad school, brand new, and in several cases I've heard her say, 'I can't talk about that; it's confidential....'" [S]he said that to a teacher...and she was right, but the teacher really shut down." Lynn expressed a frustration in the lack of teamwork exhibited by her school counseling colleague, believing that sharing limited information on a "need to know basis" with the teachers can create a stronger working alliance that is more supportive of students. Lynn elaborated in saying,

When I came out (graduate school), of course it's drilled how important confidentiality is, yes, absolutely it is. It is my professional judgment that, in a school setting, working with a child means working with other people who are pretty much the caregivers of the child -- their immediate teachers and also the assistant principal. I would definitely share information. Like, for example, if a student is having a major issue outside of school or in school or whatever and they come up with a discipline issue, you know. When I just got out of grad school I thought everything was confidential... So, I do think that over time I have become more lax with respect to confidentiality.

Similarly, Randy, a counselor with fourteen years' experience discussed the discrepancies between graduate school and on the job experience, resulting in his own interpretation of what works and what does not work in counseling students within the school setting. Following is an excerpt from Randy's interview:

If you're not going to be able to share anything that you have in a conversation with a student, how are you going to... do that and just be a person that only gets to see a kid for 30 minutes a week on the high end? That was something that I really had to kind of think about. I mean, I think, like anybody else, you develop practice of what works and what doesn't work.

Multiple participants expressed an awareness that their own view of the boundaries of confidentiality and collaboration have changed over the years. Another counselor with over five years' experience stated, "So, you know, when I first started out

I had such strong views on keeping things confidential,” with the implication that her view of confidentiality today is less “strong,” or less strict. Randy, with fourteen years’ experience, stated that he believes that student confidentiality is something “that people figure out on their own.” He elaborated in saying,

I think that sometimes people...with regard to confidentiality...don’t want to put their jobs on the line. So the risk of breaking confidentiality...and having something come back and really pinch you...professionally and personally... I think people are more likely to say, ‘I need to tell someone about this’ because the hair on the back of my neck is sticking out and if something were to happen you know not only is this going to be bad for the kid, but it’s going to be bad for me too.

Participants’ reasons, rules, or stipulations for breaking student confidentiality greatly varied among the interviews. Most participants’ did not rely upon clearly defined rules. One participant referred to his own “internal moral compass.” Another participant, John, stated, “I think it’s working from more of how far am I comfortable going with something before I feel it’s beyond me and I feel there could be harm.” Katherine, a middle school counselor described her views on student confidentiality after gaining experience in stating,

I’ve allowed myself to become a little more flexible in thinking about [confidentiality]. I think I worried before... it didn’t seem right to me that I would know the information and then I worried about how I was going to maintain a relationship with teachers when I’m going to be that strict, you know, “I’m not going to tell you anything.” And when I allowed myself,

when I saw that a counselor that has been working for many, many years wasn't necessarily following those strict guidelines, it made it easier for me to realize that it is in fact okay for me to not be so strict on the rules and on the ethics.

In all, participants appeared eager to talk about their experiences navigating grey areas of confidentiality in the school setting, and the particular challenge of balancing the ethical guideline of confidentiality while acknowledging other school professionals' role in supporting student success. All participants acknowledged an awareness and consideration of ethical codes in their decision-making. However participants' interpretations of ethical codes, particularly ASCA's guideline to provide school faculty with "accurate, objective, concise and meaningful data necessary to adequately evaluate, counsel and assist the student" (2010) varied considerably.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

The results from this study provide pertinent information for counselor educators. Participants' narratives revealed a chasm between the teaching of student confidentiality in their counselor education programs and their actual experiences with student confidentiality in the school setting. For many new school counselors, this divide represents an ethical dilemma. Counselor educators can better prepare future school counselors to face these difficult ethical challenges by integrating practice-based ethical dilemma discussions and case studies into coursework. Ethical discussions should not be limited to an Ethics course alone, but should permeate every aspect of a school counseling program.

The continued strengthening of the professional identity of school counselors may also provide a foundation for new school counselors in preparing to enter a field where few teachers or administrators understand the ethical guidelines of the school counseling profession. Having students participate in professional counseling organizations can strengthen professional identity and provide a sense of support and camaraderie. Issues of confidentiality in the school setting can be discussed in university-based supervision sessions. Supervision can provide a safe place to discuss and explore challenging ethical issues. In counselor supervision, school counselors-in-training can gain increased awareness and knowledge of ethical decision-making, support in facing difficult ethical dilemmas, as well as develop a solid foundation in their own professional identities.

### **Implications for Professional School Counselors**

Professional school counselors may use the information in this study to examine the parameters of confidentiality in their school settings. School counselors may incorporate the findings from this study into informative trainings for all school employees with a focus on student confidentiality. Professional school counselors can help clarify the expectations and parameters of student confidentiality with school administrators in management agreements. The ASCA National Model (2012) recommends a signed management agreement between professional school counselors and school administrators, defining and clarifying school counselor roles and responsibilities. Student confidentiality is one aspect of counseling that can be explored with and included in this agreement with school administrators.

It is recommended that professional school counselors use support systems within professional counseling organizations and counselors with whom they consult in order to help clarify difficult situations regarding confidential information that should be revealed to school faculty in order to assist students. The ASCA ethical code supports the team approach of counselors working alongside school faculty in order to best assist students. However, many of these participants' stories revealed occasions of confusion or frustration in determining what and how much confidential information to share with teachers and administrators. Glosoff and Pate (2002) recommend that counselors ask themselves if others need to know the information and how will this information help facilitate the growth and achievement of the student. It is recommended that counselor educators provide education, research, and training that specifically focuses on strengthening the professional identity of the school counselor, which includes reviewing and referring to the ethical codes on a consistent basis.

Reviewing the ASCA and ACA ethical codes on a consistent basis can contribute to the professional identity and growth of school counselors. Professional school counselors have an ethical obligation to stay informed and to be aware of the ACA and ASCA ethical codes. Yet most participants admitted that they rarely looked at or referred to the ethical codes after completing their graduate training programs in counseling. Membership in local, state, and national counseling organizations can provide school counselors with many opportunities for professional growth. However, many of the participants in this study reported a lack of professional development opportunities within their school districts.

## **Implications for Administrators and School Counseling Directors**

As stated above, findings from this study highlighted the dearth of professional development opportunities available in or supported by their school communities. Most opportunities provided by school systems are geared towards best practices for teachers. Throughout their narratives, these participants stressed the importance of having accessible opportunities for professional growth. Some participants in this study did not have counseling directors in their school communities, while others had the benefit of a director. Participants in systems with counseling directors discussed the support that can be found through a director and school counseling meetings. In contrast, those without supervisors seemed to struggle in isolation and a lack of support. Thus, the findings suggest that a district school counseling director can provide opportunities for support, consultation and professional growth through counseling meetings and relevant workshops and trainings for school counselors. Additionally, greater consideration can be given to school counselor field supervision in order to provide support for school counselors in making challenging ethical decisions.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was not to generalize findings to all professional school counselors. Participants in this study were employed by public schools in one state. The inclusion of participants from additional geographic regions with varied student populations may illuminate themes not explored in this study. Another limitation of this study was the exploration of an ethical, often legal subject – student confidentiality. Participants were asked to reveal how they interpret professional ethical codes, or, in essence, to what degree they follow professional ethical guidelines. Participants may

have attempted to answer questions in the way they believed to be most correct, professional, or perhaps, most legal. Any admission by a school counselor that he or she did not precisely follow professional ethical codes, liberally interpreted the codes, or failed to refer to the codes in practice, could be perceived as having negative ramifications for the school counselor. Thus, as mentioned previously, although measures were taken to help participants feel comfortable in revealing their honest experiences, the chance still exists that participants may have answered questions in a way they believed would present them positively and professionally. Some of the measure taken to help increase the comfort level of the participants during the interviews included the first author taking a few minutes to build rapport with the participants before beginning the interviews, reminding the participants that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers in the interview, and allowing the participants to choose a place to meet or to conduct the interview by telephone.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Findings from this study emphasize the value of qualitative research in exploring the phenomenon of school counselors’ constructions of student confidentiality. Using a similar qualitative methodology, the present study could be expanded through additional interviews with a national sample of professional school counselors. Exploring characteristics of the school counselors themselves might also highlight themes related to their constructions of student confidentiality in the school setting, such as whether the school counselor was trained in a CACREP-accredited master’s degree program, other professional experiences (especially in the mental health field, or education-related fields), or how the ethics course was instructed in their graduate training program (e.g.

Were school counselors and mental health counselors in the same ethics course or were they taught separately? Were confidentiality issues particular to the school setting addressed in class?).

In order to provide a more generalized view of school counselors' constructions of student confidentiality, a study utilizing quantitative methodology may reveal the prevalence of themes illuminated by this study among school counselors across the country. Of particular interest is school counselor's construction of student confidentiality over time and how school counselors' views might change with years of experience in a school system. Potential implications of such a study could relate to school counselor professional identity development.

Additionally, correlating school counselor continued professional development with confidence in ethical decision-making or with actual school counselor ethical decision-making practices is another avenue for future research.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides a small glimpse of professional school counselors' constructions of student confidentiality within the school community. The findings from this study are applicable to counselor educators, professional school counselors, and school counseling directors. Counselor educators can help bridge the gap between graduate training and real world experience by helping school counselors develop and strengthen professional identities. Counselor educators can use the findings of this study to improve training for professional school counselors to more adequately meet the needs of aspiring school counselors and support continued professional growth and development in the field of school counseling.

Professional school counselors can review the ACA and ASCA code of ethics on a regular basis in order to best provide services to, and deal with ethical issues regarding their students. Through familiarity and understanding of the ethical codes and consultation and support with other counselors, professional school counselors can determine best practices in areas of student confidentiality. Findings from this study suggest that accessible professional development opportunities within school counselors' respective school systems and trainings through regional, state, and professional counseling organizations, may provide professional school counselors with additional knowledge and awareness of ethics and confidentiality within the school community. School counseling supervisors can glean important information concerning the need for consultation with and support for professional school counselors, which can be found in regularly scheduled meetings for counselors. In addition, by providing relevant professional growth opportunities, rather than those geared for teachers, school counselors have accessible means in which to grow within the profession. ASCA (2010) ethical codes state that professional school counselors need to recognize the "powerful ally" that can be found in school faculty in working to help students in stress. Professional school counselors' experiences often include a teamwork approach with members of the school community (including school faculty and staff) in order to best meet student needs. In working with others, situations occur where school counselors may determine that it is necessary to reveal confidential student information on a "need to know" basis in order to help struggling students. Participants' stories in this study highlighted struggles that professional school counselors may face in determining what

(how much information is necessary to reveal) and who (professional school personnel who play a role in student success) to reveal confidential student information.

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## Appendix A



Are you currently working as an elementary, middle, or secondary school counselor?

Would you like to help others learn more about how school counselors' experiences with student confidentiality in the school setting?

If so, your views and experiences are needed!

Please consider participating in a one-hour interview exploring issues related to confidentiality!

Thanks for your help! Please be aware that names and other identifying information will be kept confidential!

Research is being conducted by \*\*\*\*\*

Counselor Education,

\*\*\*\*\*

Interviews will be conducted in a located that is convenient for you. If interested, please contact:

\*\*\*\*\*

## Appendix B

### *Informed Consent Agreement*

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of the study is to explore school counselors' experiences and perceptions of student confidentiality with school faculty.

**What you will do in the study:** You are being asked to voluntarily participate in an interview where you will be asked to share your perceptions and experiences regarding student confidentiality in the school setting. The interview will last approximately one hour.

The discussions that take place will be recorded on audiotape and then transcribed. The tapes will not be used for any other purpose than creating a written record or transcript of each meeting. The tape(s) will be kept in a secure/locked place and will be erased within one year after the completion of this study. I am the only person who will have access to your tapes. A participant may pass on any question during the interview and may withdraw from the study at any time.

Interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. During the interview, you will answer questions about your perceptions of and experiences with student confidentiality in the school setting. If at any time you would like to skip a question, take a break, ask a question, or withdraw from the interview, you may do so. After the interview has been transcribed, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript to assure that your story was told accurately and completely. I will send your transcript to you via e-mail unless you would prefer to receive a copy in person or via United States mail. Please specify what method you would prefer and provide me with contact information at the conclusion of our interview. Please feel free to contact me if you need to ask questions, re-schedule the interview, or to withdraw from the study. If you are uncomfortable contacting me by telephone or by e-mail, please let me know.

**Time required:** The study will require about 1 hour of your time.

**Risks:** There are no anticipated risks in this study. If any part of the discussion raises concerns for you or you need help in dealing with any issues that come up during the discussion, please let me know. I will be happy to discuss your concerns and seek a referral for services in your community, if needed.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand more about school counselors' constructions of student confidentiality.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this pseudonym will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in

any report. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. After three years, the audiotapes and the transcriptions will be destroyed.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Your audiotape will be destroyed.

**How to withdraw from the study:** If you want to withdraw from the study prior to the interview, please contact the interviewer to cancel your interview. If you decide to withdraw from the study during the interview, you may leave at any time. If you would like to withdraw from the study after the interview, please contact me and your audiotape and transcript will be destroyed. There is no penalty for withdrawing from the study.

**Payment:** You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**If you have questions about the study, contact:**

\*\*\*\*\*

Agreement: I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

## Appendix C

### *Interview Questions*

1. How do you perceive confidentiality as a school counselor in your school setting?
2. How do you think school faculty members perceive confidentiality in your role as a school counselor? Has it been discussed in any way?
3. How do you think school administrators perceive confidentiality in your role as a school counselor? Has it been discussed in any way?
4. How do you think central office staff perceives confidentiality in your role as a school counselor? Has it been discussed in any way?
5. Talk about some instances when you have needed to breach confidentiality. With whom did you consult? How did you feel?
6. What are some instances when it has been difficult to maintain confidentiality?
7. Discuss the counselor's role in meetings regarding student performance and achievement such as IEP meetings. How is confidentiality perceived in these meetings?
8. How does confidentiality differ in your school setting compared to what you learned about in your counselor education program?
9. How comfortable are you in discussing issues of confidentiality with students, parents, and school faculty?
10. What are some things you wish you knew more about or had more support with in the area of confidentiality?
11. How do you perceive the role of the ACA Code of Ethics in your school? Is it applicable? What about ASCA's Ethical Standards?
12. How much does your school administration expect to be informed regarding student issues in counseling? What about teachers?

### **Biographical Statements**

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