

**A Phenomenological Inquiry of High School Students'
Meaningful Experiences with School Counselors**

Corrine R. Sackett
Clemson University

Laura B. Farmer
Virginia Tech

Kristen B. Moran
Campbell University

Abstract

Researchers explored meaningful experiences of high school students in counseling with school counselors through phenomenological interviews. Students discussed the following themes: relationship with the school counselor, characteristics of school counselors, benefits received from school counselors, and collaboration with the school counselor. Findings indicated participants in most cases accessed their school counselors solely for academic purposes such as class scheduling and for college and career readiness. Implications for school counselors, counselor educators, and professional advocacy are discussed.

Keywords: school counselors, high school students, experiences in counseling, professional advocacy, school counseling

A Phenomenological Inquiry of High School Students' Meaningful Experiences with School Counselors

In recent years, the school counseling profession has grappled with ambiguity in the school counselor's role (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). The school counselor's role and their actual duties in the school are often incongruent with their training and values (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011) and the recommendations suggested by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). As school counselors' roles have changed over time, more has been added to their responsibilities, while inappropriate duties have not been taken away (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry 2012). The tasks that school counselors spend their time doing are often up to the principals' and other stakeholders' wants and needs, rather than the priorities of the profession (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014). As such, it is critical to continue to advocate for the school counselor's role and function in the school setting. Hearing from students about their experiences with school counselors will help in understanding what is meaningful about the counseling process with school counselors from students' perspectives, which in turn will assist advocacy efforts. Student perspectives in the school counseling literature are scant (Williams et al., 2015), and the authors have sought to fill this gap in the literature by exploring students' perspectives regarding the counseling process with school counselors.

Understanding the school counselor's role from the ASCA perspective is central to this effort of advocacy. ASCA developed the ASCA National Model in 2003 to assist in standardizing the school counseling profession, including the role of the school counselor (ASCA, 2012). According to the model, the school counselor's role is grouped

into two areas: direct and indirect services. School counselors are expected to serve all students in a school through these activities. Direct services refer to face-to-face interactions and include teaching classroom lessons, individual student planning, individual and small group counseling, and crisis response. The model recommends that school counselors spend 80% of their time in direct services, though it does not break down what percentage of time counselors should spend in individual and group counseling specifically. The focus of direct services is on three main areas: academic, career, and social/emotional. Indirect services, on the other hand, are tasks the school counselor does on behalf of the student and include referrals, consultation and collaboration efforts. The ASCA model helps to distinguish specific activities that are considered appropriate and inappropriate counseling activities for school counselors. Examples of inappropriate activities include, but are not limited to, disciplining students, teaching classes for absent teachers, maintaining student records, and coordinating special education services (ASCA, 2012). However, even with the introduction of this model in 2003, the role of the school counselor can vary from school to school and remains somewhat unclear. Furthermore, distinguishing how much time the school counselor should be devoting to the academic and career areas of student development versus the social/emotional area is not differentiated by ASCA (ASCA, 2012).

Various research studies have shown a disconnect and misunderstanding surrounding the role of the school counselor. Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, and Jones (2004) conducted a national survey that revealed administrators and school counselors at both the elementary and secondary levels disagreed on the appropriateness of certain tasks related to the role of the counselor, such as registration

and scheduling, administering tests, and maintaining student records. These researchers assert that to utilize school counselors for such clerical tasks is a misuse of their education. Perusse et al. also cautioned that school counselors must be clear about their role in the school, otherwise they risk principals defining their roles for them. Further, Amatea and Clark (2005) implemented a grounded theory study and found that one fourth of their sample of school administrators believed that school counselors are part of the administrative team and therefore should be helping with administrative (non-counseling) duties, similar to the role of an administrative assistant. These researchers found that despite the evolution of the role of the school counselor, many administrators still prefer school counselors to operate in a more traditional administrative role. Therefore, Amatea and Clark recommended that school counselors be proactive in reshaping the role expectations that administrators have of them.

Research on High School Student Experiences in School Counseling

Learning students' perspectives of school counselors will aid in advocating for school counselors to be able to fulfill their intended role. Two studies in recent years have examined high school students' experiences of school counseling and of school counselors (Solmonson, Roaten, Jones, & Albrecht, 2014; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Vela-Gude et al. employed qualitative interviews to collect the data, and Solmonson et al. utilized a quantitative survey. Vela-Gude et al. explored Latino college students' perceptions of their high school counselors. The findings from this study were discouraging. They found students perceived counselors as giving inadequate advisement and differential treatment to other students. Students also perceived counselors as unavailable and as not providing adequate individual counseling. Finally,

participants in this study perceived school counselors as having low expectations of them and as limiting their academic potential. Vela Gude et al. concluded that school counselors are straddled with large amounts of administrative responsibilities and large caseloads that keep them from interacting more often and more effectively with students in an individual capacity.

Solmonson et al. (2014) examined college freshmen perceptions of their experiences with their high school counselors through a quantitative survey. Results from this study indicated that students have positive perceptions of their high school counselors regarding availability, confidentiality and trust, and guidance activities. Students perceived the school counselors as available, trustworthy, and valued the advice they received from them. Students also reported high levels of feeling believed in by their counselors. On the other hand, results indicated that counselors need to improve in providing financial information to parents, working with students on identifying their strengths and abilities, and in conducting classroom guidance lessons.

A review of the literature reveals there is still much to be learned about high school student experiences in school counseling. The current study is unique in exploring current students' experiences in school counseling sessions. We must ask students about their experiences to provide better counseling and to better advocate for the school counselor's role as the ASCA (2012) model endorses. As such, and because there is evidence that school counselors often are unable to fulfill the role they are meant to (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Lambie & Williamson, 2004), the purpose of the study was to explore the meaningful experiences of high school students in the counseling process with school counselors through qualitative, phenomenological

interviews. Researchers examined the research question: What do high school students experience as meaningful in counseling with school counselors? The findings of this study deepen the knowledge base of the school counseling process from the perspective of the student. The results inform school counselors, counselor educators and supervisors about the experiences high school students find meaningful in school counseling.

Method

Guided by the qualitative tradition of phenomenology, responses to the research question were explored through analysis of in-depth interviews about the student's most recent session with his or her school counselor. Counseling and qualitative research have many commonalities, such as identifying themes and patterns and attempting to understand the participant's experience (Singer, 2005). Further, the qualitative tradition of phenomenology is a constructivist approach and allows for multiple realities and perspectives to define the phenomenon for the participants (Hays & Wood, 2011). The phenomenon in this case is meaningful experiences of high school students in counseling with school counselors. Questions about a single session with the school counselor were used for data collection, which allowed for client participants to reflect on their most recent session, providing more depth and better understanding than if they were reflecting on experiences from which they were further removed (Mehr, Ladany, & Caskie, 2010). In order to attend to meaningful experiences, significance sampling was used, which consists of examination of units that have significant meaning to the participant (Elliott & James, 1989). Elliott and James asserted significance sampling is preferred in exploratory research, therefore we chose this

approach as our desire was to explore what is meaningful to students in their interactions with school counselors.

Participants

Participants in this study were students from three high schools from one district in one mid-sized city in the southeastern United States. Demographics of the three schools can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant School Demographics

School	Population	Race	Gender	SES	Number of Counselors
One	815	57% African American 18% White 13% Hispanic 10% Asian 2% two or more races	52% male 48% female	60% ED 55% eligible for free lunch	2
Two	1714	60% White 28% African American 7% Hispanic 3% Asian 3% two or more races	53% male 47% female	30% ED 27% eligible for free lunch	5
Three	1410	69% White 16% African American 11% Hispanic 3% two or more races 2% Asian	50% male 50% female	28% ED 24% eligible for free lunch	5

Note. ED = economically disadvantaged.

The researchers obtained approval from the school district, as well as human subjects research approval from an institutional review board at the institution where the first author is employed. Since all students in this school district are required to meet with the school counselor, all students were considered by the researchers to have experienced the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, school administrators in the district generated a randomized sample of 50 students at a time in grades 10-12 at each identified school to serve as the participant pool for this research project. A total of 250 random students from three different high schools were selected through this process. School personnel gave these randomly selected students a flyer briefly explaining the study along with informed consent forms. Students who wished to participate in the study signed the child assent and had their guardians sign the adult consent, and returned forms to the school personnel, who then returned the forms to the first author. The resulting sample consisted of 18 participants. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 18, with 12 identified as male and six as female. As for racial and ethnic identity of participants, eight identified as White or Caucasian, seven identified as Black or African American, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as Russian. We entered each participant into a drawing for one of six \$10 Amazon gift cards as a token of appreciation.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted during the school day, with students being called out of class to a private room for the interview. Interviews focused on the students' most recent session with their school counselor. Interviews had a standardized framework that allowed for structure as well as follow-up exploration when appropriate, as

described by Patton (2002). Interview questions were open-ended and focused on what participants found most meaningful in his or her most recent visit with the school counselor. Questions included: What stood out for you in your most recent session? What things seemed most important to you? What things felt most meaningful to you in today's session? The full interview protocol is in the Appendix. The first author assured participants that interview data would not be reported back to school personnel or used in evaluation of their school counselors to encourage frank expression. The first author conducted all interviews for consistency purposes. The first author collected demographics including name, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and a pseudonym chosen by the participant. Interviews ranged in length from 15-25 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol was consistent across interviews, yet the length and depth of interviews varied depending on the participant and their willingness to elaborate on their answers. Researchers continued to collect data until saturation was achieved and new data were redundant with what had already been collected.

Data Analysis

Researchers utilized a constant comparative method described by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) to analyze the interview data. The first author conducted a first iteration of assigning open codes from reading the data broadly and noticing regularities and what stood out among participant interviews. All data from the 18 interviews were analyzed together for this process. Next, the first author conducted a second iteration of comparison within and between codes to create categories and identify themes. This method of analysis provided a way to make sense of a large

amount of data by organizing it into manageable parts and then identifying patterns and themes. The first author utilized the second author in peer review (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) during the coding and categorizing by communicating with the second author about her analysis. This peer review process included discussing new categories as they emerged, as well as difficulties in the coding process. Through this, the first and second author came to consensus on the resulting themes.

Credibility

Researchers aligned with Corbin and Strauss' (2008) assertion that in qualitative research, "...findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers', and readers' experiences with a phenomenon but at the same time the explanation is only one of many possible 'plausible' interpretations possible from data" (p. 302). The researchers also used methods to establish credibility as suggested by Creswell (2014). Researchers relied on peer debriefings as forums for discussion around issues that arose throughout the data collection and analysis process. In addition, researchers detailed the steps of the research process in an audit trail in a way that would allow for one to retrace the steps if necessary, as recommended by Anfara et al. (2002). How the researchers were positioned in this study is stated here, as all data pass and are filtered through the researchers' lens in qualitative research. All three authors are assistant professors in different counselor education programs at universities in the southeast. The first author is a licensed marriage and family therapist, had practiced in clinical mental health settings for several years, and had several years of supervisory experience, primarily with clinical mental health counselors-in-training. The second author is a licensed professional counselor, had practiced for several years

in clinical mental health settings, and had several years of supervisory experience with school and clinical mental health counselors-in-training. The third author is also a licensed professional counselor, had practiced for several years as a school counselor, and has had several years of experience supervising, primarily with school counselors-in-training. Cresswell (2014) notes the importance of declaring the researchers' biases. The authors' counseling theories are humanistically oriented and value person-centered and feminist approaches to counseling. We believe that the counseling relationship is the most important factor in counseling, and that all other good work stems from this premise. Finally, we hold a value that the personhood of the counselor is vital in the counseling relationship and counseling process. Therefore, we approached the interviews and analyzed the data through these lenses.

Findings

Four themes emerged from our investigation of high school students' meaningful experiences in the counseling process with school counselors: (a) relationship with the school counselor, (b) characteristics of school counselors, (c) benefits received from school counselors, and (d) collaboration with the school counselor. Pseudonyms are used throughout this section to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Relationship With the School Counselor

The first theme, the relationship with the school counselor, captures the range of relationships students experience with their school counselor. On one end of this relationship spectrum, students described not seeing the school counselor often and not having much of a relationship with him or her. Jordan described it as a relationship to the extent that it serves a purpose, but lacking depth beyond that:

... I would say it's kind of close, but it's not. You see your school counselor and you speak to them every so often, but you usually just go to them for the information that you need. It's not like we see them on a daily basis or they know our personality. It's like they're in a separate part of the school doing what they need to do to help you, but they also have a bunch of other students they have to help so it's not like they can build a connection with you, personally. Yeah, but it's great because it's not bad, because at least we get things done. So, that's how I would describe it. It's not a close relationship, but it's a working relationship.

Many students echoed Jordan's feelings, in that they look to the school counselor for the information they need, but do not feel a personal connection. Several students had difficulty even defining it in terms of a relationship, having only seen their school counselor for their individual graduation plan meetings.

Other students felt a bit more of a connection and trust established with the school counselor and looked to them for guidance on a variety of issues. This type of connection is demonstrated in the following quote from Sarah:

... she keeps a really good balance between being your friend and being respected, which is good, because like she needs to be a figure you can actually talk to about other things, not just talk to as a friend, and know that she's being completely honest and want what's best for you.

Similarly, Vic described the relationship in friendship terms as well, however with the caveat that the school counselor is there to help, "...the only thing I can say about the relationship between us is that they are sort of like a friend. They are helping us out, giving us advice, and stuff like that."

On the far end of the relationship spectrum, some students described having a pretty close and personal relationship with their school counselor. As Meechie said of his relationship with his school counselor, "Oh, we have a good relationship. He a cool

guy. We got that type of bond. He likes football too though.” Meechie described how he and his school counselor bonded early on their common interest in the nearby university’s football team. Meechie felt he and his school counselor had a strong connection based on the common interest in football and because he and his school counselor are similar in their personalities - quiet and funny.

Characteristics of School Counselors

The second theme, characteristics of school counselors, encompasses the array of characteristics school counselors embody that students find meaningful, including being helpful, busy, caring, efficient, accessible, and knowledgeable. They valued the school counselors’ expertise as something unique they can only gain through their interactions with them.

That students experienced their school counselors as not only helpful but also accessible, was hugely meaningful to them. Annie had this to say, “Most meaningful? ...knowing how if I ever need any help with something I can go down there.” Michael spoke to the importance of his school counselor’s welcoming attitude, “I think like when you walked in, she wasn’t just sitting there at her desk. She welcomed you in there. And you could be more open to what you had to say.” Similarly, Sarah reported, “... every time she sees me, she smiles and she waves and she asks if I’m ok. I know that it doesn’t bother her that I keep coming in.” Meechie discussed the consistent helpfulness of his school counselor, “When I talk to him about stuff, he always gives me the right stuff, like the good stuff. He never tells me nothing bad, he’s be honest with me, 24/7.” Melissa described feeling she can go to her school counselor about anything, “And just any problems you have, with teachers or anything you can go and talk to her.” Finally,

Jonathan relayed the importance of interpersonal skills in a counselor conveying accessibility, “She’s really easy to talk to, a lot easier than my last counselor...I like her.”

Students also commented on the school counselors’ caring demeanor and how meaningful that was to them. Benjamin described the care he sees in his school counselor this way:

He helps students. If they are in a bad situation or bad mood and they don’t want to be in class, he’ll take them with him in his office, give them a little time to cool down. He’ll talk to you and say, ‘you about to skip class’. I mean, the way he cares about us, I think that’s amazing.

Students seemed to be in tune with school counselors’ busy and vast schedules and responsibilities. Irene expressed this feeling, “...I feel like they’re always really busy because of all the [individual graduation plan] meetings, they have to do the whole school...whenever they’re like, ‘Oh, I’m sorry we had to reschedule so much, but it’s crazy!’” Although students experienced school counselors as busy, some greatly appreciated their school counselors’ efficiency in getting those vast amounts of tasks done. As Jordan relayed:

I guess, she rushed. Well she didn’t rush, but she did it quickly. So it shows me that she cared about my time. And she wanted to make sure that we were ready. And I feel like that’s a big thing. There’s like a certain time slot that you get for applications and stuff. And so like if you don’t know, and you need information at a certain time and you don’t have it then you are just like ‘oh’. But, she did it in a timely manner and I think that’s most meaningful to me. She cared about my time and she made sure she did what she could to get it done so I could have it in on time.

Benefits Received From School Counselors

The third theme, benefits received from school counselors, encompasses what students value receiving from school counselors, including information, advice, affirmation, encouragement, and getting help with academic related topics, as well as peer and teacher issues. Largely, students in this study looked to school counselors for information and advice and found what they received from them in this regard meaningful, as Roger stated, "Talking with the guidance counselor is always meaningful because I always look for their advice and knowledge, so the knowledge she was able to give me was very meaningful in that session." Benjamin hoped to continue to get helpful advice from his school counselor:

I plan to get more advice. I plan to use that and what we are learning today throughout school so I can better myself and stay focused in school. So I can know what kind of grades I need to keep a high GPA and to go throughout college and get a good career.

Students in this study found it meaningful that school counselors offered them affirmation for who they are and for their efforts. As Oliver Queen conveyed, "That feels good for me to know that there's more than just my family that has faith in me. There's someone out there who actually cares and knows I can do it." In addition, Irene spoke to how good it felt to have the school counselor praise her grades:

Well she was looking at my grades and I had all A's at that point and I think one or two B's, but they were high B's, and she was like 'Oh wow your grades are great!' And I was like, 'Oh thank you, can you tell my mom that?!'.

Students also found it meaningful when school counselors gave them encouragement. Jeremy spoke to the encouragement and challenge he received from his school counselor:

Well, she said I can achieve whatever I put myself for, so like, however hard I push myself that's how good my end goal will be. And she said I push myself more, the better it will be but if I push myself less, it'll be worse than if I push myself hard.

By far, students spoke most in their interviews about receiving academic related help from their school counselors. Lyla found it meaningful that she can get academically organized through her sessions with her school counselor:

I hope to become more organized and to somewhat have a visualization of my classes for the following year and see if I can tell how next year is going to go, even though it's impossible to predict the future. Helps to somewhat visualize a kind of [plan] for that I guess.

Some students did speak to accessing the school counselor for peer and teacher related issues, such as conflicts and disagreements, and found this to be meaningful. Jeremy took advantage of the school counselor's wisdom in these instances, "And then for like peer issues, like people would make fun of me in [school], so she would just like talk to me about what you would do in those instances."

Collaboration With the School Counselor

The final theme evident in the findings was collaboration and figuring things out with the school counselor. Throughout the interviews, students consistently portrayed their interactions and sessions with the school counselor as collaborative, rather than as a unilateral exchange. Annie spoke of the exchange this way:

Most important would be how she knew basically that she knew what I was talking about. So she was able to relate to what I was thinking and stuff, so it made it easier for her to help me understand more clearly.

Oliver Queen spoke of the importance of being collaborative with his school counselor:

For me, it's important to have those sessions, otherwise you are going to end up in classes you really don't want to end up. For example, the first year I didn't have one of those for middle school, and I ended in a class I really didn't like. So, having that with my guidance counselor helped me choose better classes this year that I actually enjoy being in.

Roger talked about needing to work with the school counselor in order to enroll in the classes that will challenge him:

I look for their input on what classes they would see challenging or difficult and also to get the classes that I want to get into. To bargain with them as much as I can to get into those classes.

Similarly, Bob stressed the importance of figuring out his schedule and making decisions with the school counselor:

...actually getting through to get my classes. That part was probably most important, because instead of doing all this on my own, she was there to help me. So that was the best thing, was her helping me with the classes and deciding, discussing the classes that I wanted to take, so that was good.

Melissa expressed appreciation for how her school counselor worked with her to fix her schedule in a way that she would be happy, rather than following the teachers' recommendations without considering Melissa's wishes:

Her telling me like I can work around it. Like you don't have to stay in classes you don't want to be in. And not being able to override everything, but help me so I'm satisfied, and not just like the teachers that recommended me were satisfied.

Finally, John felt that some school counselors encourage students to apply to certain colleges the school counselor favors, thus he found it meaningful that his school counselor worked with him on preparing for the colleges he was interested in:

...she's very open-minded about the colleges that I want to go to. ...She was just helping me out to get into the classes that I want to go to, not what she thinks I should go to. So I thought that was pretty nice.

It was evident that students gained confidence and assurance in their decision-making through these collaborative efforts with their school counselors.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored students' meaningful experiences in counseling with high school counselors with four prominent themes emerging. Students described the following meaningful experiences: (a) relationship with the school counselor, (b) characteristics of school counselors, (c) benefits received from school counselors, and (d) collaboration with the school counselor. Unlike the previous work of Vela-Gude et al. (2009), findings in this study support that high school students perceive their school counselors as highly knowledgeable, skilled, and accessible when they need help.

Findings from this study embody a range of student perceptions on the relationship with the school counselor. Many saw the school counselor as being in an exclusively practical role, where they may obtain information they need, but do not have a personal relationship beyond that. Other students described a more personal, friendly relationship with their school counselor that involved some level of perceived emotional support. Considering previous findings from Williams et al. (2015), middle school students in their study conveyed that school counselors should focus more on personal and systemic issues, rather than just providing academic support. Yet findings of the current study reflect varying experiences and perceptions about whether the school counselor, at the secondary level, provides personal and emotional support that extends beyond academics. Other factors may come into play such as how much initiative the

student takes in seeking personal support from the school counselor, the level of personal stressors a student is experiencing, or the level of personal support the student receives from family members and significant others in their lives (Roe, 2013).

Among the meaningful characteristics of school counselors, students described them as helpful, busy, caring, efficient, accessible, and knowledgeable. These findings most closely align with the quantitative survey results of Solmonson et al. (2014) who examined the retrospective perceptions of college freshman on their high school counselors, reporting positive perceptions of availability, confidentiality and trust, and guidance activities. Using a more diverse sample, the current study explored the perceptions of students from three different high schools with varied demographics. Even though many students perceived their school counselors to be busy, they also described them as accessible, efficient, and helpful despite their high caseloads and the demands of administrative tasks.

High school students in this study described many ways that school counselors meet their needs, including giving information, advice, affirmation, encouragement, and help with academic-related topics. Most often, students referenced receiving academic-related help, as well as post-graduation planning and guidance. Considering the ways that students described the meaning and value of getting advice, affirmation and encouragement from their school counselor, even for academic-related concerns, it seems vital that this not be understated. Proceeding successfully through school, a necessary and culturally deemed portal to the rest of one's life, is important. School counselors are in an ideal position to assist students to feel confident and capable while moving through the K-12 school years.

Finally, making collaborative decisions with the school counselor was conveyed as meaningful by participants in this study. Students felt as though interactions were mutual, even when discussing academic plans. This feeling conveys the person-centered approach that counselors provide (Rogers, 1980). With professional roots in humanism, school counselors perceive the client, or student, as a self-agent (Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014). Therefore, school counselors have a unique role in the school system by being able to enter a student's world and help them navigate important decisions through a mutual relationship.

Limitations

It is important to note several limitations of this study. First, related to methodology, though the method employed in this study was phenomenology, the interviews were lacking in depth as most participants' experiences with their school counselors were limited to meetings related to course scheduling. Next, because data collection occurred in one mid-sized city in the southeast, there may be limited transferability of the findings to student experiences in other areas of the United States. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on their most recent session with the school counselor in the interview. As such, their responses may have been affected by the amount of time between the interview and their most recent meeting with the counselor, potentially resulting in ambiguity in recall. Further, the use of a single session for data collection is not representative of the entirety of students' experiences in counseling with school counselors. Finally, since the focus of this study was on high school students and their experiences with school counselors, there may be limited

transferability of the findings to other groups, such as middle and elementary school students.

Future Research

Future research exploring meaningful experiences of students in school counseling in other school levels and settings, such as middle schools and alternative schools, would provide useful information for counselors practicing in those settings. In addition, interviewing students at varying points in time about their experiences in school counseling would give a more holistic picture of the school counseling process. This research found that most of the participants accessed their school counselor solely for academic information. Therefore, identifying a specific sample of students who accessed the school counselor for more than just academic and career guidance could be helpful in gathering more in-depth data of meaningful experiences related to social and emotional concerns. Also, given that most participants in this study accessed their school counselor solely for academic related information and help, research to examine how aligned counselors' training is with the reality of how they practice in the schools would be illuminating, as has been recommended by McKillip et al. (2012). Finally, researchers may consider employing additional means of collecting data on student meaningful experiences in school counseling, such as through written qualitative data by students about their experiences or through quantitative surveys.

Implications

There are several implications that school counselors and counselor educators can glean from these phenomenological findings, as there is value in understanding clients' subjective experience (Lemberger, 2015) and in counseling being driven by the

needs of the client (Hansen et al., 2014). As shown through the research, the counseling relationship can evolve to varying depths between the school counselor and student. Despite to what degree, the relationship was meaningful in some way to students and it is important for school counselors to be aware of its significance and to prioritize the counseling relationship with students. The volume of other administrative tasks and testing responsibilities that many school counselors undertake may create barriers to meeting individually with students (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Therefore, school counselors must be creative in gaining access to students throughout the day. Recommendations include increasing visibility throughout the school, being present in hallways during class switch, attending sporting events, and being present in the lunchroom each day.

It is also important that school counselors and school counselors-in-training understand the importance of advocating for time with students. School counselors are often utilized for registration and class scheduling, test administration, and other administrative tasks that help the school run smoothly (McKillip et al., 2012). Therefore, professional advocacy is a continued need for school counselors to continue in the role of developing personal relationships with students. When advocating for this essential time with students, school counselors may consider presenting data showing the efficacy of counseling interventions, impact on attendance, and demonstrating the connection between social and emotional wellness and academic success. Counselor educators should stress the importance of relationship building by relaying common factors data (Hauser & Hays, 2010), teaching various skills that help build rapport, and

providing methods for advocating for counselors' professional role in a school system (ACSA, 2012).

The accessibility of school counselors to their students during the school day was also found to be meaningful. When possible, having an open-door policy or "walk-in" hours may provide students increased access. Students also valued a counselor who is knowledgeable and who provides important information. Most students in this study found their school counselors to be effective in helping with academic related concerns, but it was also meaningful for some students to have assistance with social and emotional concerns. While it may sound simple, school counselors can put students at ease through demonstrating qualities of accessibility, knowledge, and openness to respond to student concerns of all types. This represents a distinct and valuable relationship from what teachers and administrators provide in the school setting.

A key finding from this study was students' recognition of the collaborative nature of their interactions with their school counselor. Students felt this collaboration to be meaningful regardless of the frequency of contact or the reason for meeting. Although the ASCA National Model (2012) provides a framework for school counseling programs that includes collaboration as one of four key themes, collaboration is often thought to refer to the adults in students' lives: administrators, teachers, outside professionals, parents, and community members. However, in this study, while privileging the voices of students, we learned that students felt a meaningful sense of collaboration with their school counselor on an individual level. Students' descriptions of collaboration with their school counselor in this study reflected feelings of empowerment, validation, and encouragement that appeared to bolster self-confidence. Therefore, the value of the

collaboration students felt with school counselors seems to deserve greater recognition as a positive aspect of the school counselor's role.

Effective professional advocacy continues to be a need in the field of school counseling (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014), with school counselor caseloads increasing in the past decade due at least in part to district budgetary concerns and a reduction in school counselors (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Having their role more clearly defined would improve school counselors' ability to have an impact in their work with students (Shimoni & Greenberger), as role ambiguity and conflict continues (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Further, it is critical that school counselors can articulate their roles clearly and advocate for themselves to perform their recommended roles and responsibilities, educate principals as to their recommended roles, and reassign inappropriate duties such as scheduling, as has been recommended by Lambie and Williamson. Counselor educators can encourage school counselors-in-training to take heart in knowing that despite the increased diversity of their professional roles in schools, they continue to serve many of the social, emotional, and wellness needs of students simply by being present, accessible, knowledgeable, and collaborative in their approach to helping.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. What are you working on with your school counselor?
2. What do you hope to get out of your time with your school counselor?
3. Can you tell me about your relationship with your school counselor?

Now I'd like you to think specifically about your most recent session....

4. When was your most recent session?
5. Can you tell me about that session?
6. How do you feel about that session?

When you think about your most recent session, I want you to think about what was meaningful to you...

7. What stood out for you in your most recent session? Which of those things stood out the most for you?
8. What things seemed most important to you? What of those seemed most important?
9. What things felt most meaningful to you in your most recent session? Which of those things felt the most meaningful?
10. What do you imagine your counselor might say was most meaningful in your most recent session?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your most recent session?

Biographical Statements

The authors affiliations are as follows: Corrine R. Sackett, Counselor Education, Clemson University; Laura B. Farmer, Counselor Education, Virginia Tech; and Kristen B. Moran, Counseling, Campbell University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Corrine Sackett, 307 Gantt Circle, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634 (email: csacket@clemson.edu).