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2009

### Leadership Practices of School Counselors

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#### Recommended Citation

Mason, E. C. M. & McMahon, H. G (2009). Leadership practices of school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(2), 107-115. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5330/psc.n.2010-13.107>

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# Leadership Practices of School Counselors

*Leadership is a vital skill called for by the school counseling profession. However, limited research has been done to examine how leadership is characterized by practicing school counselors. The purpose of the exploratory study in this article was to assess leadership practices of school counselors, and to analyze the relationships among demographics, experience, training, work setting, and leadership practices. Results presented are part of a larger study. Findings revealed that age, experience, size of school population, and professional licensure predicted leadership practices of school counselors.*

National initiatives in professional school counseling make it clear that leadership is an essential skill for school counselors working in the 21st century (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005; House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Furthermore, because other essential skills such as advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change assume a certain degree of leadership, leadership may be considered the foundation of the other essential skills. Recent training materials for school counselors have begun to address the need for school counselor leadership (ASCA, 2005; Davis, 2005; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Erford, 2003; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2004; Stone & Dahir, 2006, 2007); however, further exploration of leadership concepts specific to school counseling is needed in order to strengthen school counseling practice. Although a vital component of school counseling in the 21st century, leadership has not historically been a notion connected to school counseling and currently there are no established profiles of school counselor leadership. Moreover, leadership is difficult to define and often does not have clearly identified outcomes (Northouse, 2004). Despite its importance, leadership may have received less attention than the other essential skills, and therefore little is known about the practices of school counselor leadership at the local school level.

## LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

As a concept, leadership is complex, and the large number of proposed leadership models and the vast literature base indicate a history of researchers and professionals struggling to define leadership (e.g., Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Northouse, 2004). Traditionally, leadership within schools was seen as the domain of the school administration because of the executive and managerial hierarchies common in schools. Within this hierarchical structure, school counselors typically have neither envisioned nor endorsed themselves as leaders. More recently, however, scholars have promoted new conceptualizations of leadership that have more to do with skills, relationships, and processes than with authoritative power or position within a hierarchy. Several researchers in the field of leadership (e.g., Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Covey, 1992; Kouzes & Posner; Northouse; Sergiovanni, 2000) have identified an essence of leadership that features many of the skills that school counselors possess but have not typically been encouraged to see as “leadership.”

For example, recent changes in leadership models note a shift from a leader role of separation to one of collaboration (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Northouse, 2004; Slater, 2005). Applying this model to school counseling, the collaborative school counselor–leader participates with stakeholders and ties the school counseling program into other school-wide initiatives (Bemak, 2000; Dimmitt, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2006). In addition, DeVoss and Andrews (2006) explained that because school counseling is a relationship-oriented discipline, leadership concepts such as systems thinking, servant leadership, and empowerment come easily to many school counselors. Regarding the four “contexts” of leadership identified by Bolman and Deal (1991)—(a) structural, (b) human resource, (c) political, and (d) symbolic—Dollarhide (2003) suggested that structural leadership and human resource leadership are likely evidenced by school counselors. Dollarhide

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also posited that school counselors are lacking in the political and symbolic leadership aptitudes because those skills are not typically part of school counselor training.

One prevalent theory of leadership that goes hand in hand with recent reforms in school counseling is that of transformational leadership (Bennis, 1994; Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2004). Transformational leadership puts the leader and the group members in an egalitarian framework whereby power is shared and the goal of the group is to achieve ongoing, large-scale transformation beyond simple task completion. Through futurist appeal, the leader tactically uses the relationship variables within the group to further desired outcomes. Northouse explained,

Transformational leaders are recognized as change agents who are good role models, who can create and articulate a clear vision for an organization, who empower followers to achieve a higher standard, who act in ways that make others want to trust them, and who give meaning to organizational life. (p. 198)

Transformational leadership seems to encompass the “new vision” (House & Martin, 1998) for school counselors that stresses a dynamic and collaborative role as a school change agent and advocate who uses his or her comprehensive program to promote positive student outcomes. Thus, it follows suit that when referring to the latest changes in school counselor preparation, role, and functioning, the literature often uses variations on the word *transform* (Bemak, 2000; Dimmitt, 2003; Education Trust, 1996; Erford, 2003; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2006). Transformational leadership promotes school counselors as visionaries who engage with others in a constant practice of change and development.

### **LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: WHAT DO WE KNOW?**

Helping school counselors to understand the application of leadership to their work is key to their realizing new roles and transformed comprehensive programs. In fact, Stone and Dahir (2006) suggested that effective school counselor leadership, as a professional “mindset” (p. 94), has bearing on positive student outcomes. Yet research on school counseling and leadership is in its infancy, with only a few empirical studies published. In a recent qualitative study, Amatea and Clark (2005) examined the perceptions of administrators about the role of their school counselors. The researchers identified four distinctive patterns of school counselor role concep-

tualization: the innovative school leader, the collaborative case consultant, the responsive direct service provider, and the administrative team player. The majority of participants (17 out of 26, approximately 65%) categorized their school counselors as either case consultants or direct service providers, with these counselors acting responsively to the needs of students, parents, and staff as they arose. The smallest percentage of administrators in the study—only 12% (3 out of 26)—viewed their school counselors in the innovative school leader role, meaning they saw their school counselors as essential in implementing whole-school or system-wide change. Although this study was qualitative, and therefore generalizing the findings was not a goal of the study, the study may be indicative of larger trends and may highlight an ongoing struggle for a clear, progressive professional school counselor identity.

Studies such as Amatea and Clark’s represent a great start to expanding our understanding of leadership as it pertains to school counseling practice, and it is important to build on these studies in order to continue to expand our knowledge in this area. For instance, the leadership identity of new professional school counselors is an area that deserves special attention in light of transformed school counselor preparation programs and new professional competencies, standards, and expectations in the field. Furthermore, it will be important to gain an understanding of how school counselors use their leadership skills to promote student success. A logical first step in this process is to identify and understand what school counselors actually do in schools vis-à-vis leadership practices. In working toward that goal, the Leadership Practices Model (Kouzes & Posner, 2002a) may provide a useful tool for assessing how school counselors act as leaders in their jobs.

Through their research on leadership in a variety of settings, including education, Kouzes and Posner (2002a) identified five primary practices of leaders: “Model the Way,” “Inspire a Shared Vision,” “Challenge the Process,” “Enable Others to Act,” and “Encourage the Heart.” On face value, it seems that many school counselors may identify well with “Enable Others to Act” and “Encourage the Heart.” By contrast, because of a lack of intentional leadership training in school counseling and traditional counselor education focusing on responsive skills, practitioners may be missing skills that fall under “Challenge the Process” (e.g., taking risks, seeking out new ideas) and “Inspire a Shared Vision” (e.g., describing a bright future, compelling others toward change). Moreover, although both school counselor preparation and practice have been transformed dramatically over the past 15 years, it is unclear to what degree school counseling practice has actually changed—particularly in regard to leadership prac-

tices of school counselors. Until more systematic investigation of leadership variables among professional school counselors is conducted, all assumptions about school counselors' leadership practices will remain assumptions only.

Although research has begun to examine some leadership variables in school counseling, little is known about leadership behaviors that are typically practiced, or not practiced, by professional school counselors. Furthermore, we do not yet know how professional preparation experiences, work experiences, school setting, or individual variables contribute to school counselor leadership. It is crucial that we learn more about school counselors' leadership practices, as professional school counselors utilizing certain leadership skills or approaches may be more likely to find their place at the local school improvement table, advocate for their programs, and positively influence school climate and student achievement. Moreover, understanding more about school counselors' approaches to leadership is vital because leadership as a mindset affects the way a school counselor approaches one's job, interactions with staff, and the perceived influence one has within the school (Mason, 2008).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In this study, the researchers sought to understand leadership practices of professional school counselors generally, and to examine the relationship between personal and professional variables and leadership practices among professional school counselors. Specifically, the question was, "Is there a relationship between leadership practices of school counselors and variables of age, gender, professional training, experience, or school setting?"

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 305 professional school counselors from a Southeastern state in the United States recruited by convenience sampling from the state's school counseling conference and through representatives of the state school counseling association. Participation was voluntary. Criteria for inclusion in the research were that the school counselor be employed at the primary, elementary, middle, high, or alternative level school, and that he or she possess at least a master's degree in school counseling or an add-on degree in school counseling. School counselors working in urban, suburban, and rural parts of the state participated in the research and the final sample included participants who varied in their school setting, years of school counseling experience, and school counseling training background.

## Instruments

**Demographic survey.** The demographic form consisted of 13 items. The survey asked the participants about their personal demographics (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity), their education and training experiences in school counseling (including whether they participated in a program approved by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP]), their postgraduate training in the ASCA National Model® (2005), the school setting in which they worked, and their years of experience in school counseling.

**The Leadership Practices Inventory Self Instrument, 3rd Ed. (LPI).** The LPI (Kouzes & Posner, 2003) was developed using a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data over a number of years. The LPI has been used with a variety of populations with regard to age, gender, ethnicity, education level, work setting, and title, and it has been used in more than 250 doctoral dissertations and theses, including many that investigate the leadership practices of teachers and administrators. However, we were unable to locate research using the LPI with school counselors prior to conducting this study.

The LPI consists of 30 items, including five subscales, with a mean score for each subscale. The five subscales of the LPI are Model the Way (MTW), Inspire a Shared Vision (ISV), Challenge the Process (CTP), Enable Others to Act (EOA), and Encourage the Heart (ETH). The participant is asked to consider the question, "How often do you engage in this behavior?" as each item is read. Items are rated on a 1-to-10-point scale with 1 representing *almost never* and 10 representing *almost always*.

Internal reliability measurements indicate all subscales are at or above the .73 level using Cronbach's alpha. Test-retest reliability is stable, generally reported at the .90 level or above (Kouzes & Posner, 2004). One study reports statistically significant reliabilities for a 10-week interval while another reports reliabilities at the .79 and .86 levels (Pugh, 2000; Riley, 1991). For the self-report form of the LPI, reliability measurements are as follows: MTW, .74; ISV, .88; CTP, .79; EOA, .73; and ETH, .86. Many studies using the LPI indicate levels of internal reliability above the .60 level (Kouzes & Posner). Based on two decades of data collection, there is evidence of validity on the scores of the LPI. Factor analyses, including independent analyses of the LPI, reveal a strong five-factor construction (Herold, Fields, & Hyatt, 1993; Jurkowski, 1997; Nolan, 1992). The LPI scores have been found to be associated with leadership work behaviors and other measures of leadership demonstrating concurrent and construct validity (Huber, Maas, McCloskey, Goode, & Watson, 2000; Kouzes & Posner, 2002b; Leong, 1995).

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**Table 1. Correlations Between Leadership Practices and Gender, Age, Training, Experience, and Work Setting**

Variable	MTW	ISV	CTP	EOA	ETH
Gender <sup>a</sup>	.053	.046	.017	.060	.078
Age	.232**	.208**	.168**	.187**	.252**
Highest degree <sup>b</sup>	.086	.101	.035	.036	.047
Year of degree	-.207**	-.195**	-.126*	-.153**	-.193**
CACREP program <sup>c</sup>	.111	.071	.027	.086	.012
ASCA National Model training <sup>c</sup>	-.116*	-.085	-.040	-.125*	-.110
ASCA professional development	-.016	-.050	-.038	-.071	-.032
Teacher prior <sup>c</sup>	.084	.135*	.067	.048	.115*
Years of experience	.235**	.180**	.112	.155**	.156**
Years at current school	.181**	.163**	.120*	.162**	.161**
National certification <sup>c</sup>	.037	.020	-.003	-.016	.015
Licensed <sup>c</sup>	.160**	.097	.145*	.057	.101
School level <sup>d</sup>	-.014	.050	.003	-.054	-.089
No. of students in school	-.094	-.077	-.138*	-.174**	-.258**
SES of school <sup>e</sup>	.042	.043	.030	.024	-.018
School setting <sup>f</sup>	-.073	-.002	-.045	-.025	.016
No. of counselors in school	-.080	-.022	-.080	-.166**	-.228**

<sup>a</sup> Coded 1 (male), 2 (female).

<sup>b</sup> Coded 1 (master's), 2 (specialist), 3 (doctorate), 4 (add-on certification).

<sup>c</sup> Coded 1 (yes), 0 (no).

<sup>d</sup> Coded 1 (primary/elementary), 2 (middle/junior high), 3 (high), 4 (alternative), 5 (other).

<sup>e</sup> Coded 1 (high SES), 2 (middle SES), 3 (low SES), 4 (mixed SES).

<sup>f</sup> Coded 1 (urban), 2 (suburban), 3 (rural).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### Procedure

Approval for the research was granted by the appropriate Institutional Review Board and the state school counseling association granted permission for researchers to recruit participants via a vendor booth at the annual state school counseling conference in November 2007. Additional participants were recruited following the conference by disseminating survey packets to district supervisors of school counseling and other members of the state association. Participants in this study completed an informed consent for participation prior to completing the research packet. The research packet included the demographic survey and the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 2003), both of which are described in more detail below.

Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used to screen items and scales for variability and for consideration in further analyses. Because of

the exploratory nature of this study, bivariate correlations were used to identify variables that showed a relationship to the dependent variable, leadership. These results are presented in Table 1. As such, the following variables were included in the multiple regression analysis using the forward method of selection with the probability of inclusion set at .05: age, years of experience in school counseling, teaching prior to being a school counselor, professional licensure, year of degree, ASCA National Model training in graduate school, years at current school, number of students served in school, and number of school counselors in the school. In the forward method, the entry of a variable is based solely on statistical criteria with the variable with the greatest predictive power entering the model first. Based on this analysis, the regression results for the leadership subscales are presented in Table 2. Results presented are part of a larger study.

**Table 2. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting School Counselor Leadership Practices**

Subscale	Variable	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Adj <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Δ <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
MTW		.07	.06	.02	10.09	2, 273				
	Experience						0.17	0.05	.20**	3.37
	Licensure						2.51	1.07	.14*	2.33
ISV		.04	.04	.04	12.29	1, 274				
	Age						0.17	0.05	.21**	3.51
CTP		.05	.04	.02	6.94	2, 273				
	Age						0.11	0.04	.15*	2.53
	No. of students						-0.00	0.00	-.14*	-2.43
EOA		.06	.05	.02	8.90	2, 273				
	Age						0.08	0.03	.16**	2.71
	No. of students						-0.00	0.00	-.17**	-2.91
ETH		.13	.12		19.41	2, 273				
	Age						0.14	0.04	.22***	3.85
	No. of students						-0.00	0.00	-.25***	-4.43

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

## RESULTS

Approximately 700 surveys were distributed. Of those, 311 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 44.4%. All data were screened for accuracy, missing data, and outliers prior to application of statistical analyses. Missing data values were less than 4% and the ratio of cases to variables was 12:1. Based on graphical analysis of residuals, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were found to be tenable. Multicollinearity did not appear problematic; variance inflation was less than 2.0. All data were deemed accurate before applying any statistical procedures. Data from 6 of the original 311 participants were excluded. Three of these participants did not complete the demographic portion of the survey, and it could not be determined whether the participants met the eligibility criteria outlined by the study. The remaining 3 participants were excluded because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were computed to describe the sample.

### Personal Demographics

Of 305 participants in this study, 282 (92.5%) identified as female and 23 (7.5%) identified as male. Participants identified their race-ethnicity as the fol-

lowing: 218 (71.5%) identified as Caucasian, 77 (25.2%) identified as African American, and 10 (3.3%) identified as either Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Of the participants, 293 (96%) identified their age. The mean age of participants was 42.4 years (*SD* = 11.0, *Mdn* = 41), with the youngest participant being 23 years old and the oldest participant being 63 years old.

The distribution of school levels at which the participants were employed was as follows: primary/elementary, 138 (45.2%); middle/junior high, 80 (26.2%); high, 75 (24.6%); alternative, 5 (1.6%); and other, 7 (2.3%), which included multilevel settings such as K-8 or K-12. The average student population was 1,209 (*SD* = 753.4, *Mdn* = 1,000) students, and the average number of school counselors employed in a school was 3.03 (*SD* = 1.94, *Mdn* = 3) school counselors. Spearman's rank statistics indicated relationships between size of student population, school level, and number of school counselors. High schools typically had more students (*r* [303] = .43, *p* < .01) and employed more school counselors (*r* [303] = .51, *p* < .01).

Most participants reported the racial makeup of their school as being primarily Caucasian (*n* = 113; 37.0%) or as a mix of two or more ethnicities (*n* = 108; 35.4%). Additionally, 63 (20.7%) reported that

**The leadership identity of new professional school counselors is an area that deserves special attention in light of transformed school counselor preparation programs and new professional competencies, standards, and expectations in the field.**

the majority of students at their school were African American, 15 (4.9%) reported that the majority of students were Hispanic, and 5 (1.6%) reported that the majority of students were Asian, Native American, or multiracial. Of 303 respondents, most reported the socioeconomic status (SES) of their student population as a mix of socioeconomic statuses ( $n = 101$ ; 33.3%), 89 (29.4%) reported the majority of students as low SES, 75 (24.8%) reported the majority of students as middle SES, and 38 (12.5%) reported the majority of students as high SES. The majority of participants classified their school as suburban ( $n = 217$ ; 71.9%), 43 (14.2%) participants classified their school as rural, and 42 (13.9%) participants classified their school as urban.

### **Professional Training and Experience**

Frequencies, Pearson product-moment correlations, and Spearman's rank-order correlations were obtained for the age, professional training, and experience variables. The majority of participants in this study held only a master's degree in school counseling, the minimum degree requirement for professional school counseling practice. Degrees in school counseling obtained by participants spanned a period of 39 years. One hundred eighty-one (61.1%) participants received a degree in school counseling before or during 2003, when the ASCA National Model was first introduced. Peak years for participants receiving degrees were 1996 ( $n = 20$ ), 2004 ( $n = 25$ ), 2006 ( $n = 32$ ), and 2007 ( $n = 35$ ). Additionally, 149 (49.0%) participants reported having exposure to the ASCA National Model in their graduate programs, while 269 (88.8%) reported participating in at least one professional development session on the ASCA National Model. Pearson's  $r$  statistic ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ) indicated a positive relationship between the year the degree was obtained and exposure to the ASCA National Model in the participants' school counseling program. This indicates that those who received degrees recently are more likely to have had training in the ASCA National Model than those who graduated longer ago. Additionally, those who received degrees longer ago were likely to have more experience as a school counselor ( $r = -.76, p < .01$ ). Results indicate that 177 (58.2%) participants were teachers prior to being a school counselor.

Approximately one fourth (25.3%) of the participants in this study held national certification through the National Board for Counselor Certification as a Nationally Certified Counselor, Nationally Certified School Counselor, or both. One participant held national certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Additionally, 49 (16.4%) participants were licensed professional counselors. There was a

relationship between licensure and national certification ( $r [295] = .29, p < .01$ ).

### **The Leadership Practices Inventory**

Pearson's  $r$  correlations were calculated for relationships among the LPI subscales. Subscale correlations for the LPI indicate moderate ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ) to strong ( $r = .82, p < .001$ ) relationships. Inter-item reliability checks also were run for the LPI. Cronbach's alphas were as follows for the LPI subscales: MTW, .74; ISV, .85; CTP, .80; EOA, .73; and ETH, .80. Because the LPI has five subscales, each with six items, and the available responses range from 0 to 10, the highest possible score for any subscale is 60. Participants scored highest on the EOA subscale ( $M = 49.75, SD = 5.64$ ) and lowest on the ISV subscale ( $M = 41.98, SD = 9.14$ ). Means for the other three subscales are as follows: ETH,  $M = 47.48, SD = 7.07$ ; MTW,  $M = 46.07, SD = 6.69$ ; and CTP,  $M = 43.25, SD = 7.78$ .

Bivariate correlations (Pearson product-moment and Spearman's rank-order) were used to determine any relationships between school counselor demographics (gender, age, professional training, experience, and work setting) and leadership practices. These results are presented in Table 1. The individual subscales of the LPI were used as the measurement of leadership practices. School counselors who either were older, had more experience, or had spent more time at their current school were more likely to score higher on all or most subscales of leadership practices. The most consistent relationships with leadership were those of age and tenure at current school, as they occurred across all five subscales. The relationships with prior teaching experience and licensure were the least consistent. In addition, negative relationships were indicated between leadership practices and graduate training on the ASCA National Model, the year the most recent degree was obtained, the number of students in the school, and the number of school counselors employed in the school. Older, veteran school counselors and those with smaller student populations rated themselves higher on all or most leadership practices. Small correlations and several nonsignificant relationships were found between leadership and graduate training on the ASCA National Model.

Using multiple regression with the forward method, variables were loaded into the model based on the strength of correlation coefficients to determine any variables that were predictive of leadership practices. In terms of the individual relationships between the independent variables and leadership practices, age predicts practices of Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. Size of student population predicts practices of Challenge the Process,

Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. School counseling experience and professional licensure predict the practice of Model the Way. These results are presented in Table 2.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study suggest that, in general, older school counselors with more experience, and longer terms in their schools, self-report higher on leadership practices than do their younger, less experienced peers. School counselor age was a predictor of almost all leadership practices except for Model the Way, which was predicted by school counseling experience (which, in turn, correlated highly with school counselor age). Similarly, this current study found small but significant negative relationships between ASCA National Model training and MTW and EOA. This is interesting in light of the fact that leadership is recognized as an important feature by national movements such as the Transforming School Counseling Initiative and the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). Prior to this study it had been speculated by the researchers that because of the recent transformations in school counselor preparation, recent graduates would report higher on leadership practices than those who received degrees before 2003, because they are more likely to have received formal, specific training in leadership skills.

There are several possible interpretations to this surprising finding. First, it must be acknowledged that the results could be taken at face value: that recent graduates are not acting as leaders in their schools. If this were true, it could be seen as an indication that school counselor preparation programs, even those that are based on the ASCA National Model and the new vision of school counseling, are not doing enough to help school counseling students develop their leadership skills and identities. Perhaps, even with the recent transformations, current preparation programs are not *intentionally* or sufficiently addressing leadership as a central part of school counselors' professional identity. It also may be that graduate training may only provide a theoretical understanding of leadership in school counseling (if that), leaving graduates unsure how to put their leadership skills into practice. Certainly, more research needs to be done in this area.

It is also likely that there are developmental factors affecting the outcomes of the study. For instance, older school counselors who have more life experience, work experience, and maturity may have a more crystallized sense of their own leadership identity as well. Additionally, those school counselors may have a more comprehensive understanding of the role of

school counselors, and thus a clearer picture of leadership practices in the field. It also may be that older or veteran school counselors may perceive they have or *should* have stronger leadership skills simply because of their age or experience or because others expect them to be leaders and put them in leadership positions. Conversely, younger school counselors may perceive themselves to be less competent and may feel overwhelmed with all they have to learn on the job (Desmond, West, & Bubenzer, 2007; VanZandt & Perry, 1992). Thus, younger or beginning school counselors may not report as high on leadership practices because they lack or perceive they lack necessary knowledge, experience, or skills or because they do not think of themselves as leading, while veteran school counselors may have more work-related self-efficacy, which may lead to the stronger leadership identities evidenced in the self-report instruments used in this study.

It is also possible that there are systemic factors contributing to the results of this study. In particular, the school as a system may support veteran school counselors identifying as leaders through the operational structures that value a power differential based on experience and tenure that is commonplace in schools. An example of this may be in schools where there is more than one school counselor—there may be a title of “lead counselor,” “head counselor,” or “department head.” Holding these titles, often given based on experience, may contribute to a school counselor's perception of himself or herself as a leader and, consequently, to those not serving in the position as being less of a leader. Likewise, these within-department hierarchies reinforce to younger school counselors that the department head is “the leader.”

Some schools also use formal or informal staff mentoring programs whereby veterans are charged to guide their novice colleagues. Research supports the notion that mentoring can be a valuable resource for new school counselors acclimating to the profession (Desmond et al., 2007; VanZandt & Perry, 1992). However, on a school counseling team, a perceived power differential might suggest the idea that the veteran school counselor is the one with more valuable knowledge and, thereby, is the “leader” in the dyad. Despite the research that indicates that prior teaching experience is not an indication of greater competence as a school counselor (Olson & Allen, 1993; Smith, 2001), it is still common practice for principals, many of whom are not familiar with recent transformations in school counseling, to prefer hiring school counselors with experience and those with prior teaching experience. Such hiring practices also suggest that others perceive school counselor leadership as a function of age and experience.

**The findings from this study suggest that, in general, older school counselors with more experience, and longer terms in their schools, self-report higher on leadership practices than do their younger, less experienced peers.**



**School counselors of various ages, experience levels, and school settings must consider their leadership identity as it pertains to their programs and their professional integrity.**

Finally, it should be considered that the training in leadership that recent professional school counselors are getting *is* working, even if it didn't show up in this study. For instance, it also may be that recent graduates do, in fact, have a clearer conceptualization of their roles as leaders in schools, and a belief that leadership is a core function of school counselors, but do not feel they are able to be the leaders they want to be. From this perspective, their lower scores on the self-report leadership practices instruments may not indicate that they are doing less, but that they have higher expectations of themselves as leaders. That is, their low scores represent a gap between what they believe they *are* doing and what they believe they *should* be doing. If this were the case, it may indicate that school counselor educators and other leaders may need to work more intentionally to help create systems where new graduates *can* express their leadership mindsets in their work.

These findings are reminiscent of a study by Holcomb-McCoy (2001) on the multicultural competence of school counselors, which revealed the surprising finding that multicultural coursework had no effect on perceived multicultural competence. A second study done 4 years later, however, revealed contrasting results that multicultural coursework did indeed affect multicultural competence (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Thus, it is possible that it is still too early to accurately detect the effect of school counselor education programs' efforts to develop leadership skills in their students, as there may not be a critical mass of school counseling graduates with specific training on leadership. As in the research on school counselor multicultural competence (Holcomb-McCoy 2001, 2005), it will be worthwhile for the relationship between school counselor training and leadership to be investigated again.

### Limitations

The limitations of this study included restricting its sampling frame to practitioners in a single state. Data from this study could inform the counselor educators and department of education staff in this state of the status of leadership practices of its school counselors. Such data can be used across the field to develop future graduate preparation and professional development opportunities.

Self-reporting may be an additional limitation to this research because self-reporting is the only measurement technique being used. While Howard (1990) argued that the best way to manage the imperfections of any measurement strategy is to employ "methodological pluralism" (p. 292), self-report measures can have strong construct validity (Howard, 1994).

### Implications

This study suggests that currently, school counselor leadership is primarily a function of age, experience, and size of the school setting. Implications of this research reach across all areas of professional practice and training. School counselor preparation programs should examine the extent to which curricula focus on developing leadership skills in their students, and whether current practices in graduate programs translate to leadership practices on the job. Although these findings are preliminary and more research on school counselor leadership practices is required, it may well suggest that school counselor preparation programs need to become more intentional about developing leadership skills as well as a stronger leadership *identity* in their students, and enable those students to put those skills and identity into practice. Furthermore, those who provide professional development for school counselors also should engage practitioners in training that addresses the formation of leadership identity based on personal characteristics and school setting. School counselors of various ages, experience levels, and school settings must consider their leadership identity as it pertains to their programs and their professional integrity. Finally, further research is needed to examine school counselor leadership and school-based or student-based outcomes.

### CONCLUSION

National initiatives to transform the role of school counselors have at their core the concept that school counselors become essential educators. Although the call has been made for school counselor preparation programs to include leadership as part of their curriculum, for the leadership efforts of the national school counseling movements to take full effect, they must be enacted at the local level by school counseling practitioners. The findings of this study indicate that efforts to prepare school counselors to be leaders in schools are not yet being translated to their work in the schools. Certainly more research needs to be conducted to gain insight into the process of school counselors becoming leaders, while school counselor education programs also may want to evaluate their efforts at preparing their graduates to be leaders in schools. ■

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