

Using Leader-Member Exchange Theory to Examine Principal-School Counselor Relationships, School Counselors' Roles, Job Satisfaction, and Turnover Intentions

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Article:

Principals have considerable influence on shaping the role of school counselors with whom they work (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Ponec & Brock, 2000). Researchers used leader-member exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) to examine the relevance of principal-school counselor relationships to school counselors' role definition, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. A path analysis model explained 15% of the variance in how school counselors' roles are defined at the building level, 49% of the variance in school counselors' job satisfaction, and 20% of the variance in school counselors' turnover intentions. Implications for school counseling practice and leadership are provided.

Twenty-first-century professional school counselors are leaders, collaborators, advocates, and agents of change (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005). The ASCA National Model® (2005) emphasizes that school counselors should not work in isolation but instead engage in cooperative efforts with stakeholders to implement programs that meet all students' needs and support the mission of their school. There is a growing body of literature in which researchers describe and evaluate school counselors' relationships with stakeholders including teachers (Ray, 2007), parents or guardians (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy; 2007; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007), and community members (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy; Kolodinsky et al., 2006). Despite descriptions of school counselors' relationships with administrative stakeholders, such as principals, as essential (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005), the impact of these relationships has not been evaluated empirically.

LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE THEORY

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provides a framework for researchers to evaluate the impact of superior-subordinate relationships (Gerstner & Day, 1997). LMX theory is grounded in the belief that there are differences in the quality of relationships between leaders and their subordinates, referred to as members (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982; Liden & Graen, 1980). The value of the theory resides in the hypothesis that relationship quality is predictive of outcomes at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Gerstner & Day; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Specifically, higher-quality relationships are associated with more positive organizational and member outcomes as well as fewer work-related problems.

LMX theory has been utilized as a foundation for evaluating the outcomes of superior-subordinate relationships in a variety of professional and para-professional fields (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Although LMX theory has been applied only on a limited basis to educational settings (Heck, Bedeian, & Day, 2005; Myers, 2006), the language that LMX theorists have used to describe superior-subordinate relationship quality is consistent with school counseling literature on principal-school counselor relationships as outlined below.

Prominent LMX theorists Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) defined the construct of relationship quality as the degree to which trust, respect, and mutual obligation exist within a dyad. Similar language has been used by authors describing principal-school counselor relationships. For example, Ponec and Brock (2000) identified mutual trust as a characteristic of principal-school counselor relationships in schools with exemplary elementary counseling programs, and Zalaquett (2005) and Kaplan (1995) emphasized the importance of respect between principals and school counselors. The similarity in language between LMX theorists and principal and school counselor authors suggests that this organizational psychology theory may be applicable to principal-school counselor relationships.

Outcomes of superior-subordinate relationship quality that may be particularly salient for exploration in the school counseling profession include role definition, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Role definition has received considerable attention in school counseling literature, and the focus has shifted from describing the problem to finding solutions (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Job satisfaction (DeMato & Curcio, 2004; Rayle, 2006) and turnover intentions (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; DeMato & Curcio; Rayle) are constructs that are emerging in the school counseling literature.

ROLE DEFINITION

Role definition can be conceptualized as the identity of counselors within a school, how they spend their time, and the programs they implement. For example, some school counselors may be perceived as quasi-administrators, assist in discipline, and implement programs that are primarily responsive in nature, whereas other school counselors may be integral members of the leadership team, spend the majority of their time meeting students' academic, personal/social, or career needs, and implement programs that are developmental and preventative. Role definition is an important area of inquiry within the school counseling profession because school counselors report a discrepancy between their current and ideal roles (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008) and between their current roles and best-practice models (Brott & Myers, 1999; Burnham & Jackson, 2000).

Principals have considerable influence on shaping the roles of school counselors with whom they work (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Dollarhide et al., 2007; Ponec & Brock, 2000). At the same time, school counselors can influence these roles as well (Amatea & Clark). LMX theory posits that, regardless of the initial conceptualizations a principal (leader) may hold for a school counselor's (member's) role, the quality of the relationship is associated with the latitude a school counselor has to influence and negotiate his or her role within a school (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991, 1995). The process of influencing role development occurs through exchanges between a principal and a school counselor (Graen & Uhl-Bien).

An exchange that is associated with LMX theory is superiors' (principals') propensity to share important information and decisions with subordinates (school counselors) (Paglis & Green, 2002). Principals might engage in behaviors that include informing, consulting, and delegating regarding decisions that are relevant to and impact school counselors and their programs. LMX researchers have demonstrated that these types of exchanges are more likely to occur in higher-quality relationships than in lower-quality relationships (Liden, Sparrow, & Wayne, 1997; Paglis & Green). Principals' decision sharing may affect role definition because school counselors are provided with information about important decisions (informing) and invited to participate in the decision-making process (consulting and delegating). Furthermore, principals' decision sharing may serve as an entry point for school counselors wishing to advocate for themselves.

School counseling researchers have emphasized the importance of advocating for one's role within the school as a means of facilitating the role definition process (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Advocacy involves school counselors developing an understanding of principals' perspectives and communicating problems and potential solutions to their principals (Trusty & Brown). For advocacy efforts to be effective, the relationship between a school counselor and his or her principal must be strong (Trusty & Brown).

The relationship between principal-school counselor relationship quality and role definition may not be linear. LMX theorists describe role making as a process through which a superior and a subordinate engage in exchanges (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991, 1995). The exchanges between a principal and school counselor, therefore, may affect the outcome of how a school counselor's role is defined. Considering LMX literature in tandem with school counseling literature allows for the identification of exchanges, such as principal decision sharing and school counselor advocacy, that may mediate the relationship between principal-school counselor relationship quality and role definition, specifically in relation to program implementation discrepancy.

JOB SATISFACTION AND TURNOVER INTENTIONS

The principal-school counselor relationship and role definition also may have implications for school counselors' job satisfaction and turnover intentions. For the purposes of this study turnover intentions are defined as school counselors' intent to continue their employment at their current school. Researchers who have applied LMX theory to other professions consistently have found significant relationships between superior-subordinate relationship quality and subordinate job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Considering these constructs is important because school counselors who are satisfied with their jobs are more able to provide high-quality services to their school community (DeMato & Curcio, 2004). Furthermore, turnover intentions may be particularly problematic. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) reports a shortage of school counselors. The counseling profession as a whole is likely to experience more retirements and new job openings than graduates of master's level programs between 2004 and 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Thus, a shortage of school counselors already exists and is expected to continue into the future, and this shortage may be exacerbated by those school counselors who exit their positions prematurely because of job dissatisfaction. As such, school counselor job satisfaction and turnover intentions may become increasingly important to principals.

There is limited literature on school counselor job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Some support exists, however, for extending the LMX line of inquiry to the school counseling profession as well as considering the potential mediating function of role definition. For example, DeMato and Curcio (2004) hypothesized that support from administrators may affect job satisfaction, and Rayle (2006) found a moderate correlation between the relational construct of mattering and school counselors' job satisfaction. Additionally, Baggerly and Osborn (2006) found a small positive relationship between school counselors engaging in appropriate duties and both job satisfaction and their intent to continue their employment. Baker (2000) indicated that challenges to school counselors' roles might result in some school counselors feeling dissatisfied and leaving the profession early. From these studies, it seems apparent that further research on the school counselor-principal relationship, school counselor role definition, and school counselor job satisfaction and turnover intentions is warranted.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to assess the relevance of LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) as the foundation for explaining variance in important school counselor outcomes: role definition, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. The following research questions were addressed:

What is the direct effect of principal-school counselor relationship and the mediating impacts of principal decision sharing and school counselor's use of advocacy skills on program implementation discrepancy? It was hypothesized that there would be a negative direct effect estimate and negative mediating impacts on program implementation discrepancy.

What is the direct effect of principal-school counselor relationship as compared with the mediating impact of program implementation discrepancy on job satisfaction and turnover intentions? It was hypothesized that principal-school counselor relationship would have a positive direct effect estimate on job satisfaction and a negative direct effect estimate on turnover intentions. Further, it was hypothesized that program implementation discrepancy would have a negative mediating effect estimate on job satisfaction and a positive mediating impact on turnover intentions.

METHODS

Participants

The population of interest was licensed or credentialed school counselors. The target number of participants, 150, was set based upon recommendation of a medium-sized sample for analysis of structural equation modeling (SEM; Kline, 2005) and a number of free parameters in the hypothesized model. Kline's recommendation was guided by reviews of SEM literature that indicate that the majority of SEM samples are medium in size, or between 100 and 200 participants. Cluster sampling of school counselors in three Southeast states was used to secure a sample that was representative of this population.

Twenty-three randomly selected school districts made up the sample. All school counselors listed on individual school building Web sites as employed in each of these districts were invited to participate in the study. Thus, a random sample of 637 school counselors, employed in three Southeast states, were invited to participate in this study. Invitations were sent via e-mail to school counselors. Fifty-seven of the e-mails were returned as undeliverable or flagged as spam. As such, the sampling frame consisted of 580 school counselors. Twenty-two (3.79%) of the potential participants began the survey but did not finish. Ten (1.72%) of the respondents did not meet the eligibility requirement of being licensed or credentialed as a school counselor. The usable response rate was 32.41% ($n = 188$). The total number of respondents exceeded the target sample size.

Of the 188 school counselors whose responses were included in the data analysis, 85.64% ($n = 161$) were female and 14.36% ($n = 27$) were male. The majority of respondents described themselves as Caucasian (84.57%, $n = 159$); 13.29% ($n = 25$) described themselves as African American/Black. One respondent (0.53%) each endorsed the Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and multiethnic/multiracial categories. Participants ranged in age from 23 years to 73 years ($M = 42.74$, $SD = 11.62$). Participants reported working at the elementary school level ($n = 80$, 42.55%), middle/ junior high level ($n = 48$, 25.53%), high school level ($n = 50$, 26.60%), K-12 setting ($n = 4$, 2.10%), and other ($n = 6$, 3.19%). Respondents who endorsed "other" for level indicated that they either worked at a K-8 school or a K-2 primary school. One hundred forty-four (78.78%) of respondents described the geographic location of their school as urban or suburban, whereas 36 (20.21%) endorsed the rural description of school location.

Instrumentation and Variables

The instrumentation for this study consisted of seven research instruments or sets of items and a demographic questionnaire. Mean scores were used in analyses. Descriptive statistics for all of the variables described below are presented in Table 1. A correlation matrix for all variables in the model is presented in Table 2.

Leader-Member Exchange Seven (LMX7) — Member Version. The LMX7 is a widely used seven-item measure of the "trust, respect, and mutual obligation that generates influence between parties" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 224). In this study, scores from this instrument represent the principal-school counselor relationship variable. Respondents answered based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores represent school counselors having a stronger relationship with their principal. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .95.

School Counselor Advocacy Questionnaire. The advocacy questionnaire was designed to measure school counselors' use of advocacy skills (Clemens, 2007b). The 11 items were developed based upon the six advocacy skill sets delineated by Trusty and Brown (2005). For example, the items that reflect Trusty and Brown's communication skill set are "I listen to my principal's perspective on my role as a school counselor" and "I present information clearly about my role as a school counselor to my principal." Respondents were prompted to indicate their agreement that they use a particular advocacy skill on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Higher scores signify stronger use of advocacy skills. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of this instrument was .87 in this study.

Principals' Decision-Sharing Item Set. This nine-item set, used in previous research (Paglis & Green, 2002), was drawn from the Managerial Practice Survey (Yukl, Wall, & Lepsinger, 1990). The items represent the

construct of decision sharing and reflect the informing, consulting, and delegating behaviors in which principals may engage. For example, participants were asked to indicate how frequently their principal "asks you for your ideas and suggestions before making an important decision" and "consults with you before making major changes that will affect you." Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always. Higher scores represent greater levels of decision sharing. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .93.

School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (SCPIS). The SCPIS (Eisner & Carey, n.d.) is a 20-item measure of the degree to which a school has implemented a comprehensive school counseling program. For example, one item reads, "A written mission statement exists and is used as a foundation by all school counselors." School counselors were prompted to respond on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not implemented to 4 = fully implemented as a descriptor of the degree to which each aspect of a comprehensive school counseling program is implemented in their school.

In this study, a companion scale was added to the SCPIS to assess school counselors' perceived importance of implementing each aspect of a comprehensive school counseling program. Each item was followed by the question "How important is it to you to implement item X in your school?" Responses were anchored as 1 = not important to 4 = very important. A discrepancy score was calculated to describe the difference between degree of implementation and how important it is to a school counselor to implement each item. The discrepancy score is the sum of the absolute values of the difference between degree of implementation and perceived importance responses on each item. Smaller discrepancy scores represent schools where school counselors are doing more of what they believe to be important.

School Counseling Activities Discrepancy Scale (SCADS). While the SCPIS measures program implementation by focusing on program-related components, the SCADS (Clemens, 2007a) focuses on specific school counselor roles within the delivery system described in the ASCA National Model (2.005). The SCADS is a 20-item measure developed to assess the discrepancy between how school counselors currently spend their time and how they would prefer to spend their time in implementing their school counseling programs. Although a scale, the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (SCARS; Scarborough, 2005), exists to measure such a discrepancy, the need to align data with the ASCA National Model and the desire for a more concise measure warranted developing a new instrument. The SCADS was developed using the SCARS as a template, with permission from the author (Scarborough, personal communication, August 14, 2007). The SCADS was piloted first with a focus group of 12 school counselors and field tested in a sample ($n = 37$) of school counselors, resulting in minor changes in wording and reducing the number of items.

The SCADS uses similar directions and an identical 5-point verbal frequency scale to the SCARS, which ranged from 1 = never to 5 = routinely, but it differs in that the activities that serve as items are specifically drawn from the four delivery systems outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005). A copy of this instrument is available from the first author. Participants still are asked to indicate how often they perform specific activities and how often they would prefer to do these activities. Sample items include "classroom guidance" and "individual counseling." A discrepancy score was calculated to describe the difference between actual and preferred practice. The discrepancy score is the sum of the absolute values of the difference between actual and preferred responses on each item. Lower discrepancy scores signify more similarity between what school counselors are doing and what they prefer to do.

Program implementation discrepancy variable. The variable of program implementation discrepancy was measured by summing the school counselor report discrepancy scores on the SCPIS and the SCADS. Absolute value discrepancy scores were used because together, the measures offered insight into larger program discrepancies and the day-to-day role discrepancies that may exist. These two scales contribute equally to the measurement of program implementation discrepancy. Lower scores indicate less of a discrepancy in school counselors' program implementation.

Treating these two scales as a unidimensional measure was supported statistically by the results of a principal components analysis conducted during a pilot study ($n = 37$) and a high Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate in both the pilot study and full study (.93 and .91, respectively). Visual inspection of the scree plot associated with the pilot study principal components analysis revealed a clear break between components 1 and 2. The first component explained 71.0% of the variance in the data.

Job Satisfaction Item Set

Job satisfaction was measured by 10 items — for example, "How satisfied are you with your working relationships with teachers at the school where you are a school counselor?" and "This work allows me to make use of my skills and abilities." Nine of these items were used in previous research to assess school counselors' job satisfaction (Rayle, 2006). One item, "How satisfied are you with your working relationships with school counselors at the school where you are a school counselor?" was added to the set by the first author.

Respondents were prompted to indicate their agreement with items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very unsatisfied to 4 = very satisfied or 1 = not at all to 4 = very depending on the prompt. Respondents also were given the option to indicate that an item was not applicable to them. Mean scores were calculated by dividing the sum of the responses by the total number of items, excluding those for which a "not applicable" response was provided. Higher mean scores represented greater job satisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate was .83 in this study.

Turnover Intentions Item Set

Turnover intentions were measured by two items used in previous research to assess the likelihood that an employee will leave an organization within the next year (Irving & Meyer, 1994). School counselors were asked, "How likely is it that you will look for work outside your [school] in the next year?" and "How likely is it that you will leave your [school] within the next year?" based upon a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = extremely unlikely to 7 = extremely likely. Higher scores signify greater turnover intentions. Reliability for this two-item set was found to be .89.

RESULTS

Path analysis was used to answer the research questions because the data analytic approach allowed the researchers to estimate causal relationships among observed variables (Kline, 2005). The path analysis model was estimated using the weighted least squares method via LISREL 8.80 (Scientific Software International, 2006) and the solutions standardized. Before interpreting the results, one must first assess the degree to which the model fits the data.

Using multiple fit statistics is essential to interpreting model fit because each index represents an aspect of model fit (Kline, 2005). Kline recommended reporting the chi-squared fit statistic, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMSR) in all SEM analyses. The model fit the data well. The chi-square fit statistic is nonsignificant ($\chi^2 = 7.41$, $df = 6$, $p = .28$). Chi square is a badness of fit index, as such failing to reject the null hypothesis is considered evidence of fit (Kline). The RMSEA is also a badness of fit indicator and adjusts for the parsimonious nature of the model. The RMSEA for this model was .04, or a good fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The CFI compares the model tested to a null or baseline model. The CFI for this model was .99, also a good fit (Hu & Bender, 1999). Finally, the SRMSR measures the mean absolute correlation residual, and the SRMSR of .03 in this study also indicates a good fit (Kline). The finding that the model fits the data well indicates that the relationships expressed in the model are valid for interpretation.

Interpretation of Relationships

The strength of relationships in the model is expressed through effect estimates. The effect estimates were standardized in the current study, meaning that the mean for all effect estimates is 0 and the standard deviation is 1 (Kline, 2005). Standardizing the solutions allowed the researchers to compare the impact of each

relationship on the outcomes of interest. Thus, interpreting effect estimates includes statistical significance of the effect as well as how the impact of the relationship compares to other relationships in the model.

Research Question 1

It was hypothesized that there would be a negative direct effect estimate and negative mediating impacts on program implementation discrepancy. Partial support was found for this hypothesis' (see Figure 1). Although the directions of the effect estimates all were consistent with the hypothesis, principal decision sharing did not function as a mediating variable. The direct effect estimate of principal-school counselor relationship (-.25) and the mediating effect estimate of school counselors' use of advocacy skills (-.24) were comparable and statistically significant. The mediating effect estimate of decision sharing on program implementation was nonsignificant (-.04). Thus, principal-school counselor relationship and school counselors' use of advocacy skills influenced program implementation discrepancy, whereas principal decision sharing did not impact program implementation discrepancy in the presence of the other variables.

Research Question 2

It was hypothesized that principal-school counselor relationship would have a positive direct effect estimate on job satisfaction and a negative direct effect estimate on turnover intentions, and that program implementation discrepancy would have a negative mediating effect estimate on job satisfaction and a positive mediating impact on turnover intentions. Support was found for hypothesis 2 (see Figure 1). The direct effect of principal-school counselor relationship and mediating effect of program implementation discrepancy on job satisfaction were statistically significant and consistent with the hypothesized directions. The direct effect estimate of principal-school counselor relationship on job satisfaction (.55) was larger than the mediating effect estimate of program implementation discrepancy (-.37). Similarly, the direct effect estimate of principal-school counselor relationship and mediating effect estimate of program implementation discrepancy on turnover intentions were statistically significant and consistent with the hypothesized directions. The direct effect estimate of principal-school counselor relationship (-.36) was larger than the mediating effect estimate of program implementation discrepancy (.22) on turnover intentions. Thus, principal-school counselor relationship had a greater effect on the endogenous variables job satisfaction and turnover intentions than did program implementation discrepancy.

Overall Variance Explained by the Model

In addition to examining the specific effects of individual variables on others, it is important to investigate the overall contributions of all variables. The squared multiple correlations reduced form (δR^2 [subsmc]) indicates the amount of variance in an endogenous (dependent) variable by the exogenous (independent) variables while controlling model complexity. Results from the path analysis indicate that 15% of the variance in school counseling program implementation, 49% of the variance in school counselors' job satisfaction, and 20% of the variance in school counselors' turnover intentions were explained by the model. The amount of variance explained in each of the endogenous variables of interest is considered to be practically significant in the field of school counseling and a large effect size (Sink & Stroh, 2006).

DISCUSSION

A review of counseling and educational literature revealed no previous applications of LMX theory to principals and school counselors. Testing the hypothesized model provided initial insight into the relevance of LMX theory to the population of principals and school counselors who work together. The model included endogenous variables that were behavioral (program implementation discrepancy), cognitive (turnover intentions), and affective (job satisfaction). Thus, it functioned as an example of the explanatory power of LMX theory for exploring multiple domains of a school counselor's experience.

The constructs of principal-school counselor relationship and school counselors' use of advocacy skills had a significant effect on how school counselors' roles were defined and programs implemented at the building level. The direction of the path coefficients indicated that the stronger school counselors perceive their relationship to be with their principal, the narrower the discrepancy between how school counselors are currently implementing their programs and what they believe is ideal. When school counselors advocate for their role, the

discrepancy in program implementation is also smaller. Further, school counselors' use of advocacy skills was positively influenced by the quality of the relationship with their principal. School counselors who reported higher-quality relationships with their principals also reported using more of the skills that Trusty and Brown (2005) described as important to advocate for their role. These findings are consistent with school counseling literature and best-practice recommendations (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Trusty & Brown).

The social exchange of principal decision sharing was highly correlated with principal-school counselor relationship ($r = .82$). Although these constructs are distinct in LMX literature (Paglis & Green, 2002), school counselors in this study did not differentiate substantially between relationship quality and principals' propensity to share relevant decisions. Given the importance of principal decision sharing for school counselors, it is possible that this is the primary aspect of the relationship and, as such, is not a distinct construct for school counselors.

The constructs of job satisfaction and turnover intentions have received minimal attention in school counseling literature to date (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Forty-nine percent of the variance in school counselors' job satisfaction and 20% of the variance in turnover intentions were explained by the direct effect of principal-school counselor relationship and the mediating effect of program implementation discrepancy. The difference in the amount of variance explained in job satisfaction compared to turnover intentions is consistent with previous LMX findings. Researchers who have grounded studies in LMX theory typically explain more variance in affective measures (e.g., job satisfaction) than in cognitive or behavioral constructs (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

The stronger the relationship between a principal and school counselor and the more closely that the school counseling program aligns with how school counselors would ideally define their role and what they believe to be important, the more satisfied that school counselors are in their job and the less likely they are to pursue or accept employment outside of the school in the coming year. The findings associated with the direct effect of principal-school counselor relationship are consistent with applications of LMX research in other fields (Gerstner & Day, 1997), and the mediating effects align with Baker's (2000) conceptual assertion that school counselors' roles have implications for job satisfaction and future employment plans.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The importance of school counselors engaging in leadership and advocacy is emphasized in the ASCA National Model (2005). Many school counselors probably already engage in leadership roles in their schools, perhaps because their principals invited them to do so or possibly because they advocated for those types of roles. In either case, garnering the trust and respect of their principal would seem necessary before school counselors would be granted opportunities to engage in leadership roles such as serving on a school leadership team, examining school data to identify student needs, or leading a faculty/staff development program. It could be argued that school counselors who have effective working relationships with their principals, as supported by LMX theory, would find fewer barriers to engaging in desired leadership roles and behaviors. That is, these school counselors would feel comfortable approaching their principal with ideas and their principal would be open to considering those ideas. What also appears evident from the results of this study is that school counselors who are unwilling or unable to use advocacy skills would be less likely to assume leadership roles in their schools.

For some school counselors, becoming a leader and advocate would require a substantial change to their current role. The results of this study provide direction for school counselors wishing to effect change in their role. A starting point for school counselors wishing to redefine their role is developing a high-quality relationship with their principal. Relationship quality is important because it is not dependent on principals using a particular leadership style (e.g., transactional or transformational). Rather, developing a high-quality relationship is something that can be achieved through utilizing the skills that are part of school counselors' training and expertise.

Some of the same skills that school counselors use to foster a relationship with a student might be applicable to the principal-school counselor relationship. For example, school counselors can use active listening skills to understand their principal's perspective and demonstrate respect. Transparency can be used to share with principals how a school counselor experiences a specific interaction. Also, school counselors might initiate discussions about the quality of their working relationship with their principal. Through dialogue with their principal, school counselors can assess principals' perceptions of their relationship and possibly identify ways to improve the quality of their relationship.

The application of counseling skills to the principal-school counselor relationship can begin in counselor preparation programs. Discussing how counseling skills can be generalized to working with principals may help prepare school counselors in training for working effectively with principals. Further, resources such as Kaplan's (1995) article comparing and contrasting how principals and school counselors conceptualize situations may help school counselors in training to understand principals' perspectives and develop empathy for that unique role. Researching the principal role is similar to gathering information about a population of clients with whom a school counselor may have limited experience and knowledge.

Shared decision making also may be a way to foster high-quality principal-school counselor relationships. Decision sharing can take multiple forms. For example, a school counselor might consult with his or her principal on how best to support a teacher who is struggling with classroom management or inform a principal that he or she had a difficult conversation with a parent prior to that parent calling the principal. Decision sharing can improve working relationships with principals because it helps keep them involved in the school counseling program (Dollarhide et al., 2007).

Once the dyadic relationship between a school counselor and principal who work together is strong, then a next step is for school counselors to use the advocacy skills that Trusty and Brown (2005) have delineated in the literature. As demonstrated in this study, when school counselors use these advocacy skills, their programs are more likely to be implemented in a way that accurately reflects the school counselors' beliefs about practice. Developing advocacy skills takes practice and attention to the process.

School counselors can use self-assessment or principal assessment to evaluate their use of advocacy skills. Self-assessment might include a school counselor asking himself or herself questions such as "Am I communicating possible solutions to challenges to my role?" and "Am I 'choosing my battles' when advocating for changes to my role?" Additionally, soliciting their principal's understanding of their ideal role is a way for school counselors to assess how effectively role-related preferences have been communicated. School counselors also might ask their principal for feedback on their advocacy skills. A formal approach to requesting feedback on advocacy skills could be including the skills described by Trusty and Brown (2005) as professional goals on an individual growth plan, thus providing an opportunity for principals to give feedback on these skills throughout the year as well as an entry point for discussions about role definition.

Helping school counselors in training to develop advocacy skills is an important step toward closing the gap between current and best school counseling practice. The results of this study provide support for counselor educators including advocacy skills in school counselor preparation courses. Additionally, counselor educators might encourage school counselors in training to look for opportunities to practice these skills during field experiences. For example, an intern who needs to increase the number of direct service hours he or she is performing on a weekly basis could practice using advocacy skills. In doing so, an intern might not only move closer to completing internship requirements but also gain valuable skills advocating for his or her role.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The relevance of LMX theory to school counseling research is a substantive finding because there is a notable absence of a theoretical framework that has been successfully applied to multiple domains of school counselors' experience working in public schools. There is, however, a substantial LMX research base in other fields. Identifying aspects of LMX theory and research that are applicable to school counseling provides a foundation

for the design of future studies. For example, commitment to the profession and communication with superiors are constructs that have been explored using LMX theory that are relevant to the school counseling profession as well.

In addition to applying LMX theory to other outcomes of interest to the school counseling profession, there are opportunities to refine and evaluate the model tested in the current study. Parsimonious models are preferable to complex models. Researchers might consider removing the decision-sharing variable from the model and testing fit. Evaluating model fit across different samples of school counselors is also a relevant next step because one sample is not sufficient to evaluate fully a hypothesized model (Kaplan, 2000). Considering how well the model fits data associated with a variety of populations of school counselors (e.g., rural vs. urban; elementary, middle, and high school counselors) could provide initial insight into the relevance of this model. Further, principals' perceptions could be included in the model.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although precautions were taken to minimize threats to the internal and external validity of the study, there are several noteworthy limitations that potentially impacted the validity of the current study. Threats to internal validity included reliance on self-report data, the use of researcher-developed measurement instruments, and treating Likert-scale data as interval data. Threats to the external validity of this study included the cluster sampling strategy, potential systematic differences between nonrespondents and respondents, and a sampling frame that was limited to a narrow geographical region.

Self-report data are susceptible to the social desirability bias (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999). Although such data are an appropriate means of gathering perception information (e.g., relationship quality, job satisfaction), the limitations of self-report data are more noteworthy for measures that are designed to be objective measures of behavior (e.g., school counselors' use of advocacy skills). In an effort to minimize this threat, confidentiality was assured.

Several of the instruments used in the study were researcher developed or had limited psychometric information available to support their use. The results of the pilot study provided some support for continuing with these measures, and the reliability estimates were all within an appropriate range for research in the full study. Additional studies, however, are needed to establish test-retest reliability. The dimensionality of some constructs remains unknown and further investigations are necessary to establish the content, construct, and criterion-related validity of the measures. The validity of the measures may have impacted the results of the study.

The majority of the instrumentation was based on Likert scales. The Likert data were treated as interval Likert data in some of the analyses. This is a limitation because respondents are likely to interpret the points differently. In an effort to minimize this measurement issue, anchor points were included on all Likert scales and, when possible, each Likert score was defined.

Cluster sampling was used to secure a random sample efficiently. A limitation of cluster sampling is that the variance in the units selected may not precisely mirror the variance in the population as a whole (Thompson, 2002). It is also possible that nonrespondents differed in some systematic way from respondents. Due to the limited number of school counselor training programs in these states, it is possible that the measurements of some constructs were elevated or depressed compared to a national sample.

CONCLUSION

LMX theory is a relevant theoretical foundation for explaining variance in how school counselors' roles are defined at the building level, their job satisfaction, and their turnover intentions. The findings from the study provide empirical support for the following conceptual assertions: The relationship between principals and school counselors who work together is essential to program implementation and maintenance, and school counselors can effect change in their role by advocating for themselves. Further, how school counselors' roles

are defined has substantial implications for school counselors' job satisfaction and future employment plans. Thus, it is important for school counselors and principals to foster their relationship and for counselor educators and educational leadership faculty to set the foundation for high-quality principal-school counselor relationships in training programs.

Role definition has received considerable attention in school counseling literature, and the focus has shifted from describing the problem to finding solutions.

The process of influencing role development occurs through exchanges between a principal and a school counselor.

School counselors' use of advocacy skills was positively influenced by the quality of the relationship with their principal.

Through dialogue with their principal, school counselors can assess principals' perceptions of their relationship and possibly identify ways to improve the quality of their relationship.

The relationship between principals and school counselors who work together is essential to program implementation and maintenance, and school counselors can effect change in their role by advocating for themselves.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Included in the Hypothesized Model

Legend for Chart:

A - Principal-School Counselor Relationship

B - Principal Decision Sharing

C - School Counselor Advocacy Skills

D - Program Implementation Discrepancy

E - Job Satisfaction

F - Turnover Intentions

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Mean	3.82	3.52	3.23	.71	3.23	2.62
Standard deviation	.99	.92	.42	.40	.48	1.92
Observed range	1.00-5.00	1.00-5.00	1.09-4.00	.08-2.48	2.00-4.00	1.00-7.00
Likert scale	1-5	1-5	1-5	0-3.5	1-5	1-7

Note. N= 188.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Variables in the Model

Legend for Chart:

A - 1

B - 2

C - 3

D - 4

E - 5

F - 6

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1. Relationship	.95	.44	.82	-.37	.66	-.38
2. Advocacy skills	.48	.87	.34	-.34	.37	-.20

3. Decision sharing	.87	.38	.93	-.34	.58	-.32
4. Program implementation discrepancy	-.40	-.38	-.37	.91	-.57	.31
5. Job satisfaction	.74	.58	.66	-.66	.83	-.42
6. Turnover intentions	-.41	.37	.35	.34	-.49	.89

Note. N = 188. All correlations are statistically significant, $p \leq .01$. The top half of the matrix are observed correlations. The bottom half of the matrix are correlations corrected for unreliability of the measure. The Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates of the measures are on the diagonal in bold text.

CHART: Figure 1. Results of the path analysis. (Note. N = 188; no data were missing. Estimation method was weighted least squares. Solutions were standardized. Error term for principal-school counselor relationship was fixed. * indicates that the path coefficient was statistically significant at the $p \leq .05$ level.)

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