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# School Counselors Walking the Walk and Talking the Talk: A Grounded Theory of Effective Program Implementation

*Comprehensive, developmental school counseling programming has been associated with numerous benefits for students and is considered current best practice. A qualitative, grounded theory study was conducted to investigate eight professional school counselors employed across grade level, geographic setting, and region within the United States. This article presents this research and the emergent model for successful comprehensive, developmental school counseling program implementation. Implications for school counselor education and practice, as well as future research, are discussed.*

Studies that examine the practice of school counselors who are implementing comprehensive school counseling programs are absent from school counseling literature (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Littrell & Peterson, 2005; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001). Norm Gysbers, considered an architect of the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2005a), wrote the following:

My vision for guidance and counseling is for every school district in the United States to have a fully implemented comprehensive guidance and counseling program, serving all students and their parents and staffed by active, involved school counselors working closely with parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. (Gysbers, 2001, p. 103)

Since the 1970s, the vision for the school counseling profession has been to develop and implement comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs (CDSCPs) in every school (Green & Keys, 2001; Gysbers, 2001). This emphasis developed in response to concerns that school counselors were seen as ancillary, expendable service providers. The roles of school counselors were left to be determined by school administrators and were limited to responding to crises and engaging in minor administrative procedures (Gysbers) that served a small

number of students. In contrast, when school counseling practice is conceptualized and implemented as a program, it places school counselors in the center of education and makes it possible for them to be active, involved, integral, and transformative (Gysbers). Lapan, Gysbers, and Petroski (2003) noted, “Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs have provided school counselors K–12 with the organizational structure to focus efforts, organize work schedules, and allocate time necessary for implementing proactive school counseling activities and services that promote critical aspects of student development” (p. 196).

In the 1980s, CDSCP models were established and refined as a means to guide the practice of school counselors in their quest to turn vision into action and serve all students in a systematic and integrated way (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Recently, ASCA articulated the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and the ASCA National Model® (ASCA, 2005b), thus establishing a set of developmental student competencies and a common framework for developing, implementing, and evaluating a CDSCP.

The CDSCP is now regarded as an effective means to deliver services to all students (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Green & Keys, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Hughey, 2001; Lapan et al., 2003). Research findings indicate that more fully implemented CDSCPs have positive effects on overall student development, including academic, career, and emotional development, academic achievement, as well as school climate (Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997; Nelson, Gardner, & Fox, 1998; Sink & Stroh, 2003). In addition, a range of activities and interventions conducted by school counselors have been linked to positive changes for students in several areas including academic performance, school attendance, classroom behavior, and self-esteem (Whiston, 2007).

## SCHOOL COUNSELOR IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMS

Despite the establishment of CDSCP models, there remains wide variation in school counselor practice. There continues to be a lack of fully, or even partially, implemented CDSCPs in schools (Baker, 2001; Green & Keys, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Research has continually found that school counselors are not spending their time as they would prefer (Mustaine, Pappalardo, & Wyrick, 1996; Scarborough, 2005), and much of what they do is not reflective of what is currently advocated as best practice (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005; Scarborough). The vision has yet to be realized.

In an attempt to resolve this discrepancy between the actual practice of school counselors and best practice, researchers have begun to examine potential structural (e.g., training, caseload), personal (e.g., self-efficacy, experience), and organizational variables (e.g., school climate, perceived support from administration and colleagues) related to school counselor practice (Brott & Myers, 1999; Lehr & Sumarah, 2002; Mustaine et al., 1996; Scarborough & Culbreth, in press). Sink and Yillik-Downer (2001) conducted an exploratory study to investigate school counselors' views of CDSCP implementation and found that the more that school counselors value CDSCPs, the higher the level of their CDSCP involvement. Littrell and Peterson (2005) took a different approach in investigating the work of school counselors by conducting an in-depth, ethnographic case study of an exemplary school counselor. Through this intensive investigation, the authors developed a model of a school counselor that was rooted in the thoughts and actions of a school counselor engaged in effective practice. Characteristics identified as part of this model included, but were not limited to, an awareness of self, context, school culture, change processes, and CDSCP components and their interaction.

Research findings suggest that it is the blending of structural and system influences with personal characteristics of the school counselor that impacts how an individual may carry out his or her role as a school counselor (Brott & Myers, 1999; Littrell & Peterson, 2005; Scarborough & Culbreth, in press). It is recognized that school counselors work within a system and are impacted by a variety of influences, such as stakeholders, policies, and climate (Brott & Myers; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). However, the individual school counselor must work within the system, manage the influences, struggle with priorities, and make decisions about what to do and how to intervene. Although the CDSCP extends beyond the school counselor as it is integrated within the

total educational system, the school counselor is expected to be the leader of the program (Baker, 2001; Dollarhide, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Paisley & McMahon).

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal perspectives of school counselors having success in implementing a CDSCP. The intent was to better understand the personal beliefs, characteristics, competencies, and processes of school counselors engaging in CDSCP implementation. To achieve a deep (rather than broad) understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants, the researchers used a grounded theory qualitative design for this study (Fassinger, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 8 professional school counselors identified as implementing CDSCPs. Participants included 6 female and 2 male professional school counselors, all self-identifying as European American, with ages ranging from 27 to 52 years. Five school counselors were employed in a single Southeastern state, 2 school counselors in differing Northeastern states, and 1 school counselor in a Midwestern state. All participants held a master's degree in school counseling and were employed in public schools. One participant worked in the elementary school setting, 3 in the intermediate/middle school setting, and 4 in the high school setting. In addition to employment as a high school counselor, one participant also served as the K-12 director of guidance. Participants' caseloads ranged from 175 to 410 students. The participants' professional school counseling experience ranged from 4 to 13 years. Six participants indicated that they had previous employment experience in a school setting including substitute and ongoing teaching experience. All participants were certified/licensed school counselors in their respective states, 6 identified as being a National Certified Counselor, 4 reported current national certification as a school counselor, and 4 held state licensure as a professional counselor (e.g., LPC, LMHC). Furthermore, all the school counselor participants were active members of both national and state counseling organizations (e.g., ASCA, American Counseling Association).

### Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

Theoretical sampling was employed in order to identify participants who met the criteria under study and could provide information-rich cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Professional school counselors who were attempting to implement a CDSCP, and having

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some success in it, were the target participants for this study. Because the number of years of experience as a school counselor has been linked to more fully implemented school counseling programs (Scarborough & Culbreth, in press; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001), potential participants had to have a minimum of 3 years of school counseling experience.

Potential participants for this study were recruited through a two-stage process. Because counselor educators have a long history of being considered experts in evaluation of counseling practice for research purposes (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003, 2006), stage 1 consisted of identifying school counselor educators to nominate professional school counselors that they knew to be involved in CDSCP implementation. In an effort to enhance uniformity in participant identification, counselor educators who were known to be versed in the theory, practices, and training associated with the implementation of a CDSCP were selected to identify potential participants.

Eight counselor educators from across the United States were selected and met the following criteria: (a) They taught in a school counseling master's preparation program that was either accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2001) or recognized by the Education Trust Transforming School Counselors Initiative (Education Trust, 2007); (b) they engaged in professional service and/or research related to school counseling practice; and (c) they were actively involved in ASCA and related professional organizations. Four school counselor educators agreed to assist in identifying potential participants for this study.

In stage 2, the researchers sent a packet to the school counselor educators that included a cover letter describing the criteria for nomination of potential participants and an informed consent letter that explained the study and invited the professional school counselor to participate in the study. The school counselor educators sent the research packet to the professional school counselors that they identified. All school counselors nominated as potential participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this study by returning the signed informed consent. Once the consent and contact information were received, the researchers communicated with participants by e-mail and phone to schedule the research interviews. During the audiotaped interview, participants selected pseudonyms and are referred to by this fictitious name to ensure confidentiality.

### **Instruments**

A brief demographic questionnaire was designed to obtain participant background information. Questions included race/ethnicity, age, gender, geographic region, school counseling experience, school

level at which employed, caseload, counseling co-workers at site, previous experience in a school, certification and licensure, and professional organization involvement. Participants took 5–10 minutes at the end of the interview to complete these questions.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed that incorporated the areas of study (Patton, 1990). These included training, philosophy of participants' role as a school counselor, qualities or characteristics important to be effective school counselors, steps of program implementation, beliefs or values related to being a school counselor, and systemic concerns. At the opening of each interview, participants were queried: "You have been identified as someone who is implementing a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program. What does that mean to you?" In their own words, participants defined their experience and were encouraged to share their perceptions, perspectives, and individual understandings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the study progressed, the interview questions were refined and became more focused on the critical dimensions emerging across interviews (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss). Flexibility was given for participants to tell their story, with researchers following up and exploring the individually expressed material.

### **Interviewers/Investigators**

This study grew out of a discussion between the authors regarding the absence of a strengths-based perspective within the empirical literature of school counseling program implementation. The primary author is employed as a counselor educator specializing in school counselor education and holds a master's degree in school counseling from a CACREP-accredited program and a doctoral degree in counselor education. She is a certified school counselor and former school counselor, with experience in implementing a CDSCP at the elementary and middle school levels. At the time of the study, the second author was a doctoral student in counselor education and working as a teacher and counselor in alternative education. She held a master's degree in counseling services from a non-CACREP-accredited program. She has had no traditional school counseling experience, nor has she been directly involved in CDSCP implementation, beyond her master's degree internship placement.

### **Data Analysis**

As opposed to a set of specific techniques, the development of this grounded theory was composed of a nonsequential series of seven analytic strategies, including but not exclusive to (a) purposeful immersion in the literature, (b) theoretical sampling, (c) established data collection protocol, (d) simultaneous data collection and analysis, (e) coding and con-

stant comparative analysis, (f) establishing trustworthiness, and (g) integration of emergent theory (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout the research process, there was an ongoing development and refinement of the emerging grounded theory.

**Simultaneous data collection and analysis.** Data collection occurred through telephone interviews, over a 13-month period. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed in its entirety. The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 and 90 minutes. Once the interviews were transcribed verbatim, they were sent to participants to be checked for accuracy and participants were invited to clarify or supplement any of their responses. Because grounded theory endorses that data analyses occur simultaneously with data collection, interviews continued until saturation occurred (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

**Coding and constant comparative analysis.** We shared responsibility for conducting and transcribing the interviews and were both involved in all aspects of data coding and analysis. We separately open-coded the first two transcripts and, after comparison, discussed the discrepancies. Next, we established a general coding protocol, and then identified participant statements that could be incorporated into future questions for upcoming participants.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was employed throughout the coding processes, such that each subsequent interview was coded with the previous interviews and emergent theory in mind (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Axial coding was used, categorizing data from all transcripts by similar ideas, repeated words, or recurring themes. In addition to attaching a label to each code category, we listed the properties defining each category and provided illustrations from the data that manifested the definition or properties (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Before we proceeded to the final coding, peer debriefers reviewed selected examples of the categories and provided feedback on a draft of the graphic representation of the emerging theory. We discussed the debriefers' commentary until consensus was reached about how to continue reexamining the data.

**Trustworthiness.** The trustworthiness of qualitative research is predicated on establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks were all utilized to enhance the credibility and transferability of the findings. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, we looked for negative cases not fitting the current definitions, in efforts to ensure the accuracy of the findings

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Bowers, 1990). We also utilized peer debriefers to reduce the likelihood of error (Bogdan & Biklen). As a two-person research team, each of us purposefully maintained different degrees of familiarity with the related literature and wrote independent field notes and memos throughout the project. An audit trail, including note taking and memo writing, was maintained.

**Integration of emergent theory.** Once saturation was obtained and the emergent theory was articulated, we distributed the narrative explanation and a graphic representation of the theory to all participants for a second member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Next, a second peer debriefing was conducted to elicit reaction to the emergent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## RESULTS

The present study resulted in an emergent theoretical model for understanding the personal and systemic conditions, contexts, and actions related to the implementation of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program by professional school counselors. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), in grounded theory the phenomenon embodies the central idea or happening of the study. *Causal conditions* represent the events that lead to the *phenomenon*, while *context* and *intervening conditions* refer to the properties that impact the *action* strategies that are taken to carry out and manage the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin). The action strategies subsequently result in *consequences*. The following sections describe the major components of the grounded theoretical model using direct quotes from participants. The model is represented in Figure 1.

### Causal Conditions

Several causal conditions emerged from the data (see Figure 1). Participants discussed personal and professional influences on their work to implement a CDSCP, including the motivation to help children and adolescents, personal abilities and characteristics, school counselor training/education, familiarity with CDSCP models, professional role models, and professional experience. All participants spoke not only of their desire to work with children, but also of their commitment to “serve,” “help,” and “encourage” the students.

Participants discussed characteristics important for being a successful school counselor. These included “people skills,” counseling, writing, communication, and organization skills. Another theme reflected skills in working within a system. One participant, Bob, summarized these in saying,

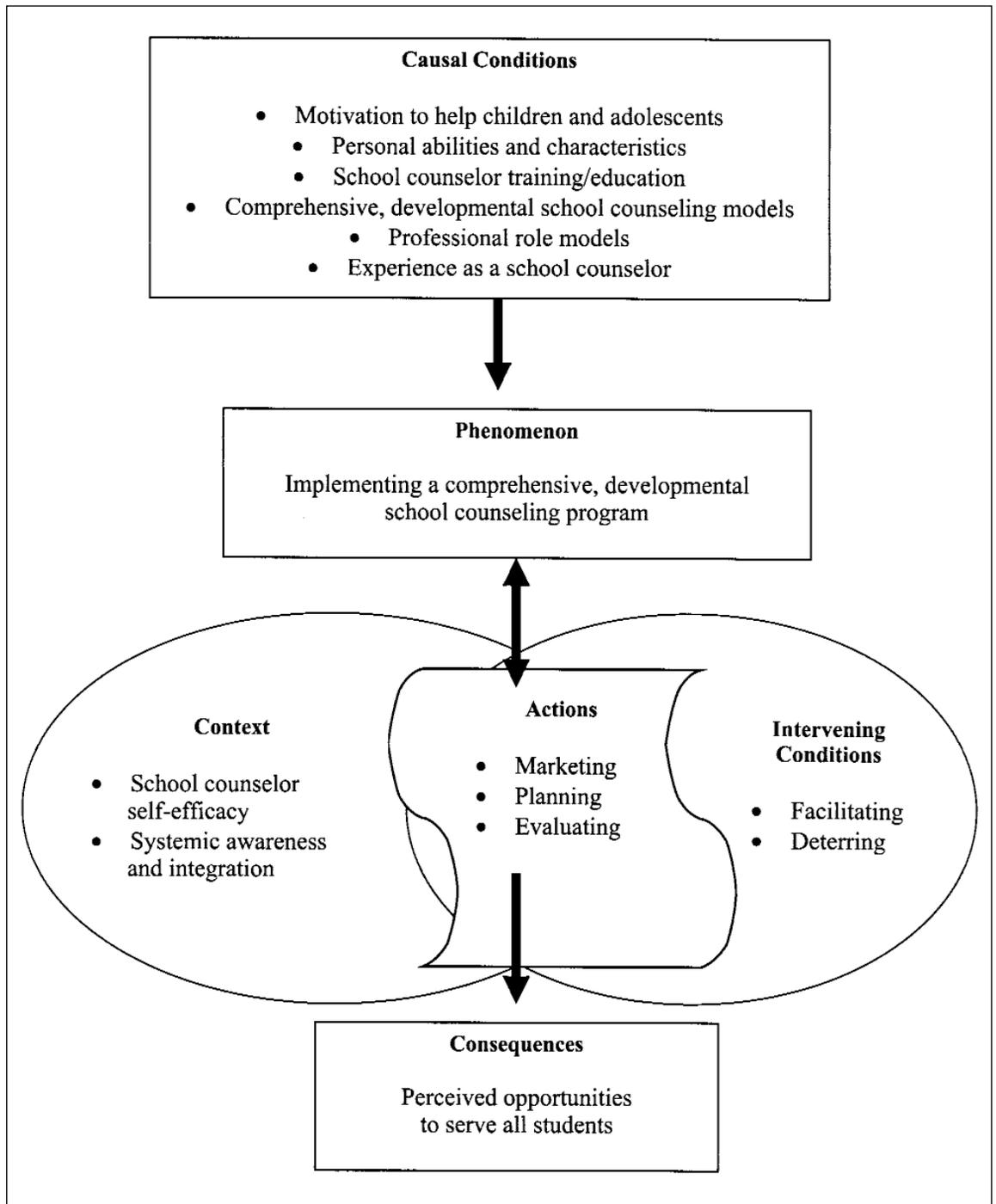


Figure 1. Emergent model of school counselor implementation of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program.

You need to be the leader. You need to be someone with vision. You need to be willing to be flexible and change with the times. And you need to be willing to be the advocate. ... I think you need to be a collaborator; you need to get all your other constituencies to buy into what you're trying to do.

Six of 8 participants were trained in the implementation of a CDSCP within their graduate education and the remaining 2 participants emphasized the significance of postgraduate professional development (i.e., ASCA conference) on their understanding of the implementation of a CDSCP. Each participant highlighted ongoing peer consultation and a professional support network (labeled as *pro-*

*professional role models*) in providing examples for successful program implementation as well as support. Like others, Heather connected this support network to “keeping you energized to continuing doing what you’re doing.”

Participants also noted that their actual experiences implementing a program reinforced their continued efforts. Leigh described these evolving experiences:

The difference with me now with some experience is a little more belief that it [CDSCP] could really happen. There’s a belief when you’re just praying [that it will work] and then there’s a belief when you’ve seen it before. I’ve been part of making it happen.

Heather linked these conditions to her work of implementing a CDSCP:

I guess my training at the graduate level they were always talking about the comprehensive program and we were doing some practice in those areas, you know, creating plans, but most of my experience really came from on the job. This is a new high school and I started as one of the original counselors. ... One of my colleagues had 1 year experience, and the other one was much more experienced. We borrowed ideas from other schools, and from what we had done in our graduate work, and sort of put it all together and said, “OK, now what do we want to do, and what makes sense for our school and our community?”

### **Phenomenon: Implementing a CDSCP**

All participants in this study were selected because they were identified as professional school counselors who were having success in implementing a CDSCP. The participants discussed the influences on their decisions to implement the program (causal conditions), the actions and strategies they employed to do so (actions), and the conditions that impacted the actions they undertook to be successful (context and intervening conditions). All participants expressed the importance of implementing a CDSCP. Heather described her conceptualization of a CDSCP in saying,

So we’re trying to figure out how to build the program so it really is comprehensive K–12. ... I guess it means sort of taking in the bigger picture of all the pieces that are involved in setting up a program and then looking at it down to the details of what do students need to be able to do, [and then] what do the counselors need to do ... building the whole thing comprehensively.

Kathy also described how she has come to see a CDSCP:

I’ve come to understand it more and more as being a manager of a program versus just being a “counselor” who works in a school. I guess at the beginning I would think, “Oh, I’m a school counselor, I’m going to counsel. I’m going to do group counseling and individual counseling.” But as I really got into things, it is managing, whether it is connecting [students with] tutoring programs or organizing a parent night, organizing clubs at school, like anti-bullying groups, peer mediators, and things like that are all part of our school counseling program.

Participants also described the intervention components of their program including individual and group counseling, classroom guidance, coordination of special programs (e.g., career day, testing, special education teams), consultation, and advisement. Liz stated that she does

classroom guidance once a month in every class, five groups on a weekly basis, and see probably six to seven kids for individual counseling every week. Then a monthly student assessment team ... a lot of meetings with parents and teachers ... and also now coordinate a couple of school-wide programs.

### **Context of Implementing a CDSCP**

Context, in grounded theory, represents properties or conditions within which the action strategies were taken to manage and carry out the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). School counselor self-efficacy and systemic awareness and integration emerged as the contextual dimensions of professional school counselors implementing CDSCPs.

**School counselor self-efficacy.** *School counselor self-efficacy* refers to the beliefs the participants had that implementation of a CDSCP would lead to desired outcomes and that they were capable of implementing a CDSCP. Anna’s statement, “We know that the CDSCP is the best way to meet the needs of all students in the school,” reflected the pervasive belief across participants in the outcomes of the implementation of a CDSCP. Spartan realized that the CDSCP matched his vision for working with all students and addressing all developmental domains (academic, career, and personal/social). He said, “Trying to work with all students, with different levels of students and to reach out to everybody, that made sense with a counseling program.” He went on to say, “Now we work with all students in all domains.” Others discussed the importance in

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“believing” to being able to continue to implement a program. Liz stated, “I think you have to believe in what you’re advocating for.”

In addition to their beliefs that implementing a CDSCP led to desired outcomes, participants’ statements reflected their beliefs in their abilities to do what was necessary to implement a CDSCP. Liz noted that “this can work. Just have to figure out how to make it work.” Spartan commented that he “never thought this was something that we couldn’t do. I suppose it’s only limited by what we ourselves believed we couldn’t do.”

**Systemic awareness and integration.** *Systemic awareness and integration* reflects participant beliefs and attitudes around working within a system (i.e., the school). Participants spoke about the need for their programs to be integrated within their respective schools. Illustrating this, Heather said, “OK, now what do we want to do and what makes sense for our school and our community?” All participants spoke about the need to advocate for themselves and their program, connect with others in the system, and build support around their professional role and the program that they were seeking to implement. They also spoke about how they positioned themselves and their program within the school. The participants believed that their ability to best serve students (through the implementation of a CDSCP) was ultimately tied to the acceptance of themselves and the program within the school. Bob said, “You need to get all your other constituencies to buy into what you’re trying to do.” Beth stated,

I think my kids that I serve are my number-one client. However, if I neglect the parents or the families of those kids or if I neglect the teachers of those kids or the administration of the school, they all affect how successful the kids are going to be.

All participants spoke about the need to become an active part of the system. They used words such as *insert*, *infuse*, and *bridge* to describe the “positioning” processes. Heather described this process:

Some of it was figuring out where we needed to be involved as school counselors, whether it was advocating for ourselves professionally or advocating for students, and making sure we were in those spaces and places and getting ourselves out there.

### **Intervening Conditions**

In addition to contexts, intervening conditions are broad structural conditions that impact action strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The intervening conditions were those conditions within the

school that both deterred and facilitated the implementation of a CDSCP. Participants discussed a relatively equal number of facilitating and deterring conditions.

Deterring conditions included the school’s history of not having a CDSCP, lack of administrative support, differing stakeholder visions, obstructive colleagues, multiple demands, and non-CDSCP school counselor duties. Anna noted that “we all inherited whatever everyone’s expectations were from the previous generations of school counselors at my school, and there are a lot of expectations that are not developmental school counseling expectations.” In identifying other challenges to CDSCP implementation, Bob said that his “list of things to do is far longer than whatever gets done.” More explicitly, Kathy objected to “being put in charge of testing. I don’t like being put in the position as, I kind of feel like I’m the teachers’ boss.” Liz reacted to administrative tasks that interfered with addressing student needs: “There’s a lot of time I feel is wasted. ... I’ve got kids lined up to see me, I’ve got referrals out the wazoo, and I’m in here pushing paperwork.”

Of note is that the same types of conditions when present in a negative form became facilitating conditions when present in a positive form (e.g., school’s history of having a CDSCP, administrative support, shared stakeholder visions, collaborative colleagues, lack of multiple demands, and school counselor duties aligned with CDSCP implementation). Liz discussed her program’s history in saying that she “really stepped into a program that was already established, that the counselor two counselors ago had set up.” Kathy spoke to several facilitating conditions when she noted that her school

did not have a program before I started. I was hired because I had a developmental program before. ... I think [if the principal left] I have enough support with the other counselors and with the teachers to continue doing what we now do.

### **Actions**

Actions are those processes that are devised to carry out or manage the phenomenon within context and under specific conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There were three overarching actions employed to carry out the implementation of a CDSCP within the contexts of school counselor self-efficacy and systemic thinking and integration and under the facilitating and deterring conditions within the school. These actions included marketing, planning, and evaluating. Though discussed separately for the purposes of clarity, these processes were intertwined and influenced each other.

**Marketing.** Marketing actions reflect strategies used to gain support within the system. Because this support was not automatic, due to a variety of reasons (see “Intervening Conditions”), the participants needed to convince, help to open minds, or change perceptions regarding their school counseling roles and processes. Bob stated, “People do not really know what you [school counselors] do, so the PR [public relations] is a huge tactic.” Spartan noted,

You’re still looking at the challenge of changing perceptions of what a school counselor is and their role in the school. So it was a big change as far as getting people to at least think of things differently and looked at differently.

These participants spoke of selling, public relations, and campaigning in the global and specific sense. Beth summarized the global importance of what were determined to be marketing strategies: “I think in everything we do, for us to be able to support the kids, we have to be able to sell.” In relation to a specific purpose, Liz mentioned, “And so right now I’m in the process of kind of pitching a campaign for that [implementation of a school-wide character education program] with the staff.”

All participants described specific means they used to promote themselves and their program, including developing a counseling department brochure, a newsletter, a Web site, and a “counseling commercial.” In addition, participants created opportunities to speak to their faculty during faculty meetings or staff development, and to speak to parents at open house nights. Anna described how she clarified her role with her students: “When they’re having a problem with another student, I tell them, ‘I can talk with you, we can do mediation, but if you are looking to have some disciplinary action, then you need to talk to the principal.’” Leigh spoke of the link between her connections with her teachers and her access to students: “I really think it’s taking a chapter out of the *How to Win Friends and Influence People* book. You kind of have to woo them a little bit.” She went on to talk about how she tried to facilitate those connections:

I’m going to give teachers fortune cookies at the beginning of the year that have teacher phrases in them. Not because I think they’ll like me better, it has nothing to do with that, but if I can help [teacher motivation] in that way ... if I can infuse a few things here and there, I think that helps my referrals. I think it helps build connections.

The essence of the marketing strategies can be sum-

marized by Kathy: “We do different ideas to get the point across about what we do and why we do it and why we do it the way we do it.”

**Planning.** Participants described the “big picture” of their vision of a CDSCP as well as how to implement and manage the “details.” Spartan indicated that planning provided a “road map and directional piece.” Each participant also discussed the importance of what Bob stated, “You’ve got to figure out where the priority is.” Participants described a process of determining priorities that was setting specific but that included considering the most “visible” activities, activities that reached the largest group of students (i.e., classroom guidance, large-group activities), and those that served the needs of the school as identified by the constituents and through school and intervention data.

The participants also spoke of having plans in order to address details and the “big picture.” Beth stated,

I keep a weekly plan of what I’m scheduled to do and I think keeping a weekly, monthly, and as a team we keep a yearly calendar, so it helps us to stay focused on where we’re trying to go.

She, like others, also recognized the need for some flexibility in order to address “crisis things that come up, issues that have to be dealt with immediately, such as a student in danger, etc.”

An overarching theme reflected in the ongoing process of planning and implementing a CDSCP was, as Bob stated, “a work in progress.” He went on to add, “We’re headed in the right direction and better than what we were doing 5 years ago.”

**Evaluating.** Although the participants engaged in evaluation to varying degrees, all participants spoke about evaluation of services and their CDSCP. For instance, all participants conducted formal and/or informal needs assessments to determine priorities and plan interventions. The use of these data also reflected the reciprocal nature between planning and evaluating activities. Heather illustrated her use of planning and evaluation in saying, “We’ve been making plans and doing lists and calendars and things. Next fall, we’ll do a needs assessment K–12 to figure out what our community wants us to be working on and working toward.” Leigh summarized the philosophy behind evaluation and detailed its many forms, saying,

That is different to me than program evaluation. I do program ... along with needs assessment. And that helps me evaluate what components are working and what are not. But then I also [evaluate] my classroom guidance

**All participants expressed the importance of implementing a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program.**

and individual counseling, all with evaluation components, to figure out, “Did this work for you?” And then teachers’ evaluation, “Did this student improve or not?” and if so, “In what ways?”

The remaining participants had a similar philosophy about evaluation, but they discussed the varying stages of their respective processes. For example, Bob stated, “Evaluation is probably one of our biggest goals that is part of our plan.”

**Links among marketing, planning, and evaluating.** There was a reciprocal nature between the actions utilized to implement a CDSCP. For example, a common practice among participants was the formation of program advisory committees, composed of various school stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, students, community members). These committees served multiple purposes of planning and evaluation, as well as marketing. Liz talked about the actions utilized to implement the CDSCP:

The first year was we [co-counselor and myself] pretty much did what was already in place and made few changes. And then we evaluated at the end of the year. ... We sent out a survey, teachers got one and parents another and it was helpful to us because we felt we got really positive feedback in every area except two, and there was one thing from the teachers that said they’d like to see more school-wide programs, which was great and fit in with where we wanted to go. ... This year we’re trying to select where we want to go and setting up new programs and dropping things that we think are not working.

**Consequences**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) referred to consequences as the outcomes or results of the actions taken for carrying out the phenomenon under a specific set of perceived conditions. The combined set of actions resulted in an overall consequence stated as the perceived opportunities to serve all students. This consequence was reflected in positive terms by both Anna, “We know that CDSCP is the best way to meet the needs of all students in the school,” and Spartan, “Now we work with all students in all domains.” Additionally, Leigh succinctly stated, “I’d like to make the school a place where all kids can learn and all kids want to learn and that it is a safe place for them.”

Another finding emerged. All participants noted that should all of their actions toward implementation of a CDSCP ultimately fail and therefore they perceived they would not have opportunities to

implement plans and processes to serve all students, they would leave that system rather than compromise what they believed to be in the best interest of students. Leigh emphasized this point: “I’ll be honest with you, I would be very unhappy and dissatisfied to continue working in a job that wasn’t making the changes and differences that I know can be made.” Participants linked the hypothetical inability to implement the program to insurmountable deterring conditions (e.g., lack of administrative support, obstructive colleagues). Beth stated, “I just don’t think I’d want to be a counselor in a school that was bogged down with copying records. ... I’ve seen it happen, so it would be really hard for me not to be able to do my job.” Liz spoke about two experiences she had where she was prevented from implementing a CDSCP that could effectively strive to meet the needs of all students and therefore she left each of those schools.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The participants described an intentional, active, and reciprocal process in which they tailored the CDSCP and its implementation to meet the specific needs of the students, the school, and the community in which it was delivered. This finding echoed the evolving and ongoing process of CDSCP implementation described by Lewis and Borunda (2006), in which professional school counselors were continually developing and implementing both proactive and responsive services to serve students.

Lewis and Borunda (2006) also asserted that school counseling program implementation is more about the vision and personhood of the school counselor rather than simply one’s role and functions. The findings of this study indicated that participants were committed to serving children and adolescents within their schools. They discussed how they were impacted by their training, professional development, and professional experiences. In turn, they internalized a professional role that focused on the implementation of a program rather than the provision of services and were committed to engaging in practice that had the greatest likelihood of meeting the needs of all students.

The participants in this study were aware of the importance of understanding the system in which they worked (i.e., the school) and placed importance on addressing its particular needs (system awareness and integration). This awareness has been addressed throughout school counseling literature and has received increased attention in recent years. Napierkowski and Parsons (1995) described the importance of understanding the culture and values of a school. Colbert, Vernon-Jones, and Pransky (2006) described a framework through which the

**All participants described specific means they used to promote themselves and their program, including developing a counseling department brochure, a newsletter, a Web site, and a “counseling commercial.”**

school processes that enhance or hinder student development may be identified. The model of excellence described by Littrell and Peterson (2005) detailed how the school context allowed or inhibited the plans of the school counselor as well as the actions taken by the school counselor to increase her influence on the students' lives. Dollarhide (2003) outlined the importance of political leadership that involves awareness of informal and formal structures of power in a system, and skills in negotiation, persuasion, collaboration, and advocacy.

In addition to emphasizing systemic needs, the participants believed in the importance of a CDSCP and in their abilities to implement it (school counselor self-efficacy). This was consistent with Sink and Yillik-Downer's (2001) finding that there was a relationship between the ascribed importance to a CDSCP and how involved professional school counselors were in its development and implementation. The concept of self-efficacy also has been applied to the successful CDSCP implementation (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005; Scarborough & Culbreth, in press; Sutton & Fall, 1995). Bandura (2000) theorized that people with high efficacy are aware of both opportunities and constraints, but they use their creativity and perseverance to locate where they have some control and make decisions about how to use their time and energy accordingly. Research has found that professional school counselors with higher levels of outcome expectancy for CDSCPs (belief that CDSCP implementation will lead to positive results) are more likely to be working to implement such programs (Scarborough & Culbreth).

Participants spoke about CDSCP implementation, including the provision of services for all students, in terms of an ongoing, flexible, active, and somewhat circular process of marketing, planning, and evaluating action strategies that were responsive to the systems in which they worked. These concurrent action strategies involved understanding the political and structural components influencing a CDSCP and required entrepreneurial skills to implement. It was not that the professional school counselor participants did not experience common barriers to program implementation (e.g., time, high caseloads, lack of support/understanding of role by stakeholders); it was that they continually engaged in strategic activities to overcome these barriers and to facilitate support. Identification and intentional implementation of these activities necessitated planning and evaluation, both commonly discussed in the school counseling literature. However, the less discussed process of marketing also emerged as an action strategy in CDSCP implementation.

The integration of oneself and the school counseling program into the core mission of the school has been identified as a "key ingredient" to adoption of

important roles within education (Colbert et al., 2006). These professional school counselors incorporated marketing, planning, and evaluating to develop and implement a program to serve all students. This process mirrors the five-stage cyclical and circular process (Discuss, Plan, Design, Implement, Evaluate) outlined as a means for implementation of the National Standards for School Counseling Programs and the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005b; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Cobia & Henderson, 2003). Additionally, participants' experiences in implementing the program reinforced the integration of the program within the school, and also further influenced their beliefs in the benefits of the program (outcome expectancy) and their beliefs in their abilities as school counselors (self-efficacy). This finding appears consistent with Sink and Yillik-Downer's (2001) observation that as professional school counselors' experience and confidence in CDSCP implementation increased, so did their investment in and ownership of their program increase.

### **Limitations**

Researcher bias is a common issue cited in qualitative research. The issue of bias was addressed by using open-ended interview questions covering a variety of school counselor and school counseling program aspects, working as a team by pairing a naïve and an experienced school counselor researcher, having continual discussions and memo procedures throughout data analysis, and using peer debriefers and member checking. However, despite these attempts, it is possible that researcher bias impacted the results of the study. Another limitation of the study is reflected in sampling procedures. The expertise of known school counselor educators was used to select the participants for the study, rather than the researchers' assessment of the participants. Although guidelines were provided for choosing participants, the selection was determined by school counselor educators.

Although generalizability is not a focus of qualitative research, applicability of the results is important. Methods of triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and thick description were employed to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of findings. Yet, the emergent theory ultimately represents the 8 participants' most salient experiences during a specific moment in time (Richie et al., 1997).

### **Implications**

The results from this study have several implications for school counselor practice, training, and research. Given the importance of personal guidelines in informing the work of the professional school counselor (Bandura, 2000; Brott & Myers, 1999; Littrell

**Through further examination of what school counselors are doing effectively, we can identify ways to build on and expand these successes and ultimately enable school counselors to have a greater impact on all students.**

& Peterson, 2005), school counselors could reflect on and discuss their own vision, beliefs, and values related to school counseling, education, child and adolescent development, and other core issues that impact students and families. *The ASCA National Model Workbook* (ASCA, 2004) provides exercises to examine and articulate beliefs and assumptions, school counseling philosophy, and a school counseling program mission statement.

In addition to personal vision and values, self-efficacy has a significant impact on performance. Bandura (2000) contended that in order to have incentive to act, people need to believe that the desired result is possible and that they have some influence to minimize undesired effects. School counselor education programs play a significant role in developing awareness, knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy of future school counselors. There has been much more attention in recent years to educate counselors-in-training to design, implement, and evaluate CDSCPs. Until very recently there has been less emphasis in developing leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and system-influencing skills. There have been calls from within the profession to transform school counselor preparation programs to specifically address these areas (Education Trust, 2007; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; House & Sears, 2002). Indeed, recent school counselor education textbooks have begun to incorporate information on systems, system change, leadership, and advocacy (see Brown & Trusty, 2005a; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Parsons & Kahn, 2005; Stone & Dahir, 2006; VanZandt & Hayslip, 2001). However, a thorough discussion of marketing has yet to be included in this call. Counselor educators may want to consider marketing skills when doing admissions screening and also infuse marketing knowledge and skills throughout school counseling coursework.

It is not only important to attend to what is taught, but also to how teaching occurs. Participants in this study spoke about the importance of practical assignments and opportunities for experiential and authentic learning activities. Brott (2006) outlined several pedagogical strategies used in courses such as counseling theory, appraisal, school counseling, and practicum and internship for training effective school counselors. Akos and Scarborough (2004) examined the clinical preparation of school counselors and offered suggestions for activities to be incorporated into field experiences. Specific activities that encourage reflective practice and action research also may be used to help professional school counselors bridge theory with practice (Brott; Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; House & Sears, 2002; Koch & Arhar, 2002; Rowell, 2006). This training is not limited to counselor education programs. It is noteworthy that all participants in

this study mentioned the significance of ongoing professional development through memberships in school counseling organizations (i.e., state school counselor associations, ASCA) and attendance of conferences and workshops to expand their knowledge and skills as well as provide motivation to begin or continue the work of program implementation.

Learning through observation of and interaction with others is a primary learning method (Bandura, 2000). Professional school counselors can learn new skills through direct observation and guidance from supervisors, mentors, and peers. Several participants in this study mentioned the importance of having personal models they could observe and with whom they could talk about the implementation and management of a CDSCP. Thus, supervision that incorporates all aspects of a CDSCP seems important, particularly for new graduates. Luke and Bernard's (2006) School Counseling Supervision Model offers a framework for supervision across a CDSCP. Additionally, peer consultation groups, whether formally established or an informal group of professionals who meet on their own time, facilitate awareness, knowledge, skill development, and, perhaps most importantly, motivation to implement a CDSCP. For descriptions of peer consultation groups, see Logan (1997) and Thomas (2005).

Although the present study represents a step in understanding professional school counselors' experiences in implementing CDSCPs, more research in this area is needed. The model of CDSCP implementation that emerged from this study needs further testing. Perhaps aspects of the model may be quantified and tested empirically. Studies also are needed that examine systems that are open to CDSCP implementation and the relationship of school counselor marketing skills that may be associated with implementation. In addition, comparisons could be made between professional school counselor who are successfully implementing programs and those who are not. One element of such research is the identification of professional school counselors who are implementing CDSCPs. Recipients of the American School Counselor Association's (2006) Recognized ASCA Model Program awards and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2007) certified school counselors could be potential participants; however, a standard for identifying best practice or levels of practice in the implementation of CDSCPs would aid researchers.

This study focused on the perspectives and experiences of professional school counselors implementing CDSCPs, but not on the impact of these programs. The participants in this study believed that their efforts to implement and integrate a CDSCP were the best way to serve the needs of children and

adolescents. Further study linking more fully implemented CDSCPs to positive student outcomes is needed (Brown & Trusty, 2005b; Lapan et al., 1997, 2003; Sink, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of a school counseling program emerged as a means to ensure that the unique training, perspective, and interventions of school counselors were an integral part of the mission to facilitate the success of all students. The overall objective is not simply to implement a comprehensive developmental program, but rather, as articulated by Liz, “You have to believe in what you’re advocating for [school counseling program] ... and not just in [that], but in the larger purpose that *it’s for kids*.” Through the further examination of what school counselors are doing effectively, we can identify ways to build on and expand these successes and ultimately enable school counselors to have a greater impact on all students. The process of effectively serving the needs of all students begins with a single step, but this one step may lead to more and more school counselors echoing the words of Kathy, “I really think we are walking the walk and talking the talk.” ■

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