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Interdisciplinary Collaborations in Schools: Lived Experiences of School-Based Professionals

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Abstract

Collaboration is an ethical duty of school-based professionals and essential to addressing student needs and maximizing student success. This phenomenological qualitative research study explored the collaborative experiences between school counselors, school-based mental health counselors (SBMHCs), and school social workers. Through semi-structured interviews, we examined the experiences of 12 practicing school-based professionals. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), we identified five group experiential themes: (a) it takes a village, (b) factors that influence collaboration, (c) advantages of teamwork, (d) challenges in collaborating, and (e) recommendations to improve collaborative practices. Implications for graduate training programs and recommendations for future research studies are discussed.

Significance to the Public

Collaboration is an ethical duty of school-based professionals working in K–12 schools and enables student success. However, literature has focused solely on collaboration between school counselors and teachers, school counselors and principals, school counselors and clinical mental health counselors, and school counselors and school psychologists. This study adds to the literature by exploring the collaborative experiences between school counselors, school-based mental health counselors, and school social workers.

Keywords: collaboration, school counselors, school-based mental health counselors, school social workers, interpretative phenomenological analysis

Prior to the pandemic, youth mental health was identified as a major concern (Zabek, et al., 2023) and today it remains a concern in the United States. Recent data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated an increase over the last decade in the percentage of students who experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, suicidal ideations, and suicide attempts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). In 2023, 4 in 10 high school students experienced depressive symptoms, 2 in 10 experienced suicidal ideations, and 1 in 10 attempted suicide (CDC, 2024). Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024) found that 69% of public schools reported an increase in mental health

concerns among their students. This further underlines the ongoing mental health crisis among youth.

Youth in the United States are facing mental health challenges, which has resulted in a national emergency declaring youth mental health a national priority (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). Among youth aged 6–17, 1 in 6 have reported experiencing a mental health disorder, including most commonly attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavior problems, anxiety, and depression (National Alliance of Mental Illness [NAMI], 2024). Students needing mental health support are far more likely to receive services at

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school than outside counseling agencies (King-White, 2019). Schools have been identified as a setting to address the mental and emotional concerns of students while decreasing potential barriers impacting access to services such as transportation, stigma, and more (Lambie et al., 2019).

Schools represent a critical context to addressing the mental and emotional concerns of students, and, with adequate support and early intervention, can help improve student well-being and school success (Lambie et al., 2019). Therefore, school-based professionals including but not limited to school counselors, school-based mental health counselors (SBMHCs), school social workers, school psychologists, and teachers are expected to support students. The school counselors' role is to improve student success by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2023; Christian & Brown, 2018). SBMHCs' role is to address the mental health needs of students in the school setting (Christian & Brown, 2018). School social workers play an integral role as the link between school, home, and community, with a goal of helping students to achieve academic success (National Association of Social Workers, 2024). Each professional has a different role in the school but share a common goal of student success.

Collaborations between school-based counselors can enhance the outcome of counseling for students and support their academic and social/emotional needs (Appling et al., 2019). Interprofessional collaborations in schools can provide holistic support for students and families (Franklin et al., 2024). Yet, literature has primarily focused on collaborations between school counselors and teachers (Davis et al., 2023; Foxx & Anderson, 2020; Limberg et al., 2021), school counselors and principals (Cinotti et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2022; Jordan, 2022; Wikoff & Wood, 2022), school counselors and clinical mental health counselors (Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015), and school counselors and school psychologists (Staton & Gilligan, 2003). Therefore, our study explored the collaborative experiences between school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers. Findings will offer

implications for counselor education training programs.



School-Based Professionals

School-based professionals offer a unique skill set and play an integral role in supporting the needs of K–12 students. School counselors are certified/licensed professionals who maximize student success by implementing comprehensive school counseling programs that address academic, career, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2023). SBMHCs are licensed mental health professionals employed by the school district or community agency to address the mental health needs of students by conducting intakes and assessments, providing interventions such as crisis response, and offering individual and group counseling (Christian & Brown, 2018). School social workers are licensed mental health providers who specialize in family and community systems and link students and their families to community services (Cowan et al., 2013).

School Counselors

School counselors implement school counseling programs using direct (e.g., counseling, instruction, advisement) and indirect services (e.g., consultation, collaboration, referrals). ASCA recommends they spend 80% of their time providing these services to students (ASCA, 2019; Christian & Brown, 2018). Given school counselors' training and unique position in schools, they can help address the social/emotional needs of students by providing early identification and intervention and prevention programming (Foxx et al., 2016). These tasks call for school counselors to collaborate and consult with school-based professionals. Collaboration and consultation can aid school counselors in identifying student needs and make informed decisions to promote student success (ASCA, 2019).

School-Based Mental Health Counselors

Students are referred to SBMHCs using a referral process facilitated by the school counselor or social worker. While school counselors are trained and equipped to provide short-term therapy for concerns that impede student success (ASCA, 2019), they often collaborate with SBMHCs when students need long-term counseling (Christian & Brown, 2018), as mental health issues can affect students' academic performance (King-White, 2019; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015). Furthermore, SBMHCs are encouraged to collaborate with school counselors to eliminate barriers that could impede student achievement (Christian & Brown, 2018).

School Social Workers

School social workers develop partnerships with community agencies and coordinate wraparound services to support students (Keller & Grumbach, 2023). School social workers support the mission of the schools by ensuring students can access and benefit from school programs and services (Keller & Grumbach, 2023). Schools are the center of most communities; thus, school social workers serve as a bridge between family, school, and community (Keller & Grumbach, 2023).

Collaboration

ASCA (2019) defines collaboration as the “process in which multiple individuals work toward a common goal and share responsibility for the associated tasks” (p. 82). Likewise, Friend (2021) referred to collaboration as a professional concept called *interpersonal collaboration* and defined it as a “style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 7). Collaboration has been identified as a best practice strategy for addressing needs such as mental health (Friend, 2021; Mellin et al., 2011), as well as an ethical duty for school professionals (ASCA, 2019).

Studies on collaboration in the context of school professionals have identified benefits and challenges for collaborating and suggestions for improvement. School professionals collaborate to meet student needs and increase student success (Huberman et al., 2012; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Oehrtman, 2022; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Sanders et al., 2019). Challenges associated with collaborating include role confusion (Appling et al., 2019; Lenares-Solomon, 2019; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Rumping et al., 2019), lack of communication (Appling et al., 2019; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015), and time constraints (Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Staton & Gilligan, 2003). Despite the challenges associated with collaborating with professionals, studies have identified potential suggestions for improving collaborative practices, including incorporating opportunities for interprofessional collaboration in graduate training programs (Appling et al., 2019; Foxx & Anderson, 2020; Mellin et al., 2011), planned meetings with professionals to discuss collaborative efforts (Appling et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2023; Jordan, 2022; Rumping et al., 2019), awareness and understanding of other disciplines (Appling et al., 2019; Oehrtman, 2022; Rumping et al., 2019; Staton & Gilligan, 2003), and willingness to work together (Rumping et al., 2019). Studies have also identified factors that make for an effective collaboration, including clarity of roles (Appling et al., 2019; Lenares-Solomon, 2019; Limberg et al., 2021; Rumping et al., 2019), clear communication (Appling et al., 2019; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015), and establishing a strong relationship (Limberg et al., 2021; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015). Despite the numerous studies on collaboration, limited studies have focused on the unique collaborative experiences between school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers.

The Current Study

Based on a review of the literature, limited studies exist exploring the interdisciplinary collaboration between school-based professionals (e.g., school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers). Therefore, to address this gap in the literature, this

study aimed to explore the collaborative experiences between school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers. The research question that guided this study was: *What are the collaborative experiences of school counselors, school-based mental health counselors (SBMHCs), and school social workers who work in K–12 schools?* Findings will offer insight into the interdisciplinary practices in school settings and provide counselor educators with ideas on how to integrate interdisciplinary preparation in counseling programs.

Method

We aimed to understand the collaborative experiences of K–12 school-based professionals. Given the purpose of the study, we used a phenomenology methodology design and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Phenomenology is the most appropriate approach, as this design gathers information on the experiences of several individuals to derive meaning from the phenomenon (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). IPA shares the philosophy of knowledge comprised of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2021). Using a cyclical process, IPA is concerned with understanding the rich and detailed lived experiences of participants and making sense of the experience (Smith et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers used a constructivist epistemological lens to design the study. Constructivism assumes that multiple truths exist and that knowledge is constructed through social interaction, specifically between the researcher and participants (Hays & Singh, 2023).

Participants and Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB), we invited school counselors, school social workers, and SBMHCs to complete an online questionnaire using Qualtrics to obtain informed consent and demographic information, and a semi-structured individual interview was

conducted. The inclusion criteria included (a) licensed/certified school counselors, school social workers, or SBMHCs, (b) have at least 1 year of experience working in a U.S. school setting, and (c) prior experience collaborating with school professionals identified in the study. Researchers recruited participants using online professional Facebook groups (e.g., Professional School Counselors of Color, The School Counselor's Desk, School-Based Mental Health Clinicians, Successful Black Social Workers, and Simmons University DSW class) and counseling listservs (e.g., ASCA member community and Georgia School Counselor Association). Interested participants who met the criteria, signed the consent form, and filled out the questionnaire on Qualtrics were contacted for an interview.

Twelve school-based professionals working in K–12 schools across the four regions in the United States participated in this study. The recommended sample size for a phenomenology study is 5–25 participants (Hays & Singh, 2023). However, there is no required sample size for IPA, as the focus is on detailed accounts of participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2021). Six participants were school counselors, four were school social workers, and two were SBMHCs. Participants' years of experience practicing ranged from 1.5 to 20, and ages ranged from 24 to 60 years old. Three participants self-identified as Black, four as Hispanic, and five as White. Eleven participants self-identified as women and one as a man.

Among the six school counselors, two worked at an elementary school, one worked at a middle school, and three worked at a high school. Among the four school social workers, two worked at both an elementary and middle school, one worked at both a middle and high school, and one worked at a high school. Among the two SBMHCs, one worked at all three school levels, and the other worked at a middle school and two high schools. One participant worked in a rural school, eight worked in suburban schools, and three worked in urban schools. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information about the participants.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Role	Years of Experience	School Level	Caseload	School Setting
Naomi	Black	F	42	SC	14	M	251–500	Suburban
Chris	Black	M	43	SSW	7	E & M	501–1000	Rural
Lena	Hispanic	F	30	SSW	3.5	E & M	250 or less	Urban
Safe space	Black	F	60	SSW	20	M & H	250 or less	Suburban
Natalia	Hispanic	F	47	SC	3	E	251–500	Urban
Holly	White	F	24	SBMHC	1.5	E, M, & H	18–20	Suburban
Doctor	Hispanic	F	35	SC	3	H	251–500	Urban
Systemic	White	F	43	SBMHC	7	M & (2) H	68–155	Suburban
Rose	White	F	40+	SC	9	H	251–500	Suburban
Counselor1	White	F	43	SC	19	E	251–500	Suburban
Kaylyn	White	F	33	SSW	4	H	250 or less	Suburban
Karen	Hispanic	F	34	SC	10	H	250 or less	Suburban

Note. SC stands for school counselor. SSW stands for school social worker. SBMHC stands for school-based mental health counselor.

Research Team

The research team is comprised of three Black cisgender women who have counseling experience. The first author is a counselor educator who teaches and supervises counselors-in-training. The second author is a provisionally licensed social worker and former school social worker. The third author is a doctoral student in a counselor education program and a former school counselor. During the development of the study, researchers discussed their prior experience as it relates to the phenomenon. The team had positive experiences collaborating with school professionals. They found working as a team allowed them to help more students. While the experience was overall positive, one member encountered conflict with administration, which mirrors some of the

participants’ experience. Throughout the data collection process, researchers discussed their subjectivity and documented their reactions to the participants on their transcripts and by journaling. Processing by discussing and documenting our reactions to participants allowed us to bracket opinions and biases and focus on how participants are making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2021).

Data Collection

The first author contacted potential participants via email to schedule an interview. While more than 12 people signed the consent and completed the Qualtrics survey, some of the professionals did not meet the inclusion criteria and others did not

respond to the email invitation to participate in the interview. The first author conducted six interviews, and the second and third authors each conducted three interviews. The researchers conducted a 60-minute, semi-structured interview with each participant using the interview protocol, which included 14 open-ended questions exploring school professionals' experiences collaborating. The 60-minute interviews were conducted using Zoom. Researchers also used Zoom to transcribe the interviews but manually reviewed them for accuracy. The interview protocol was developed based on researchers' experience in the field and a review of the literature. Example questions include the following: "What has been your personal experience collaborating with other school-based professionals? What experiences stand out the most about your collaborations and why? Describe how these collaborations affect your work in support of students." When necessary, researchers asked follow-up questions to gain clarity.

Data Analysis

We followed Smith et al.'s (2021) seven-step interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) procedure to analyze the data. First, all three researchers independently immersed themselves in the data by reading and rereading the transcript and listening to the recorded interviews. Second, we wrote exploratory notes that identified what mattered to the participants and the meaning. Third, we constructed experiential statements using the notes to capture what was crucial to the participant. Next, researchers searched for connections or patterns by mapping how the statements fit together and named the clusters of experiential statements that best described the experience. Then, we repeated the process for each case/transcript and searched for patterns across all participants to generate group experiential themes. This final step allowed researchers to look for patterns of similarity and differences in the shared experiences (Smith et al., 2021). We met three times as a team to discuss data collection, analysis procedures, and our reactions to the participants; review transcripts and independent codes from the first interview; and

reach a consensus on themes before analyzing the rest of the interviews. We followed this process for all transcripts and used member checking as a final form of verification.

Trustworthiness

We used three strategies to maximize trustworthiness, including member checking, consensus meetings, and an audit trail that included a reflexive journal documenting our reaction to participants. The first author conducted member checking via email by inviting participants to review, confirm, and provide input on their transcripts and findings (Hays & Singh, 2023). During this process, three participants provided additional feedback for clarity, and corrections were made to ensure their experiences were accurately reflected in the analysis. We met three times as a team to discuss data collection and analysis. In the first meeting, we discussed the research process, including the data collection and analysis procedures. At the second meeting, we discussed our reactions to the interviews (reflexive journals), reviewed transcripts and independent codes, and reached a consensus on the initial themes. During the third meeting, which lasted for several hours, we reviewed the independent codes and themes for all participants and came to a consensus on the five themes. Consensus meetings and an audit trail enhance credibility in qualitative research. Hays and Singh (2023) defined an audit trail as physical evidence of data collection and analysis procedures (e.g., interview protocol, meeting notes, reflexive journals, transcripts, and codebook).



Findings

Five group experiential themes emerged, reflecting the experiences of school-based professionals collaborating in K–12 schools. The themes included: (a) it takes a village, (b) factors that influence collaboration, (c) advantages of teamwork, (d) challenges in collaborating, and (e) recommendations to improve collaborative

practices. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Theme 1: It Takes a Village

The first theme, *it takes a village*, captures participants' experiences of working together to provide holistic support to students and their families. The participants shared different ways they support students and their families, and the professionals they collaborate with, to address student needs. This underscores the importance of collaborating with various professionals to maximize student success. Counselor1 (SC) emphasized the need to collaborate with a team of professionals to ensure student needs are met and families are supported:

We have students regularly being diagnosed with various impairments and disabilities, and we need that information from families and [mental health] providers to offer appropriate supports at school. We work together to help families navigate those processes (e.g., paperwork and providing families with resources) because it can be difficult. I just think everyone benefits when folks are working together. We can't do it alone.

Similarly, Lena (SSW) described needing assistance from a school-based professional regarding a student crisis "there was one case that was very challenging because the child had disclosed a fear of going home because of corporal punishment. I went to the guidance counselor for help, and we talked about the case." Additionally, other school counselors expressed needing to collaborate with school professionals to discuss prevention. Karen (SC) said, "The social worker and I worked with the seminar teacher to provide suicide prevention training to all seniors after learning many students shared concerns for their friends who were having suicidal thoughts."

Divergence within this theme included one participant who shared that he primarily works with other school professionals to increase parent engagement as instructed by the district, but he has not encountered a situation in which he needed to work with another school professional to address

the mental health needs of students. Chris (SSW) shared, "Based on the experiences I've had thus far, I've never had an extreme circumstance at work where I needed to bring in this psychologist or counselor. It hasn't been from a mental health standpoint or level of expertise." Collaboration is a necessity for school-based professionals who are working to help students succeed. Participants in this study emphasized the importance of teamwork and not working in isolation. Karen (SC) said, "We don't have to do things by ourselves. If we want to truly support our students, it will take all of us."

Theme 2: Factors That Influence Collaboration

The second theme, *factors that influence collaboration*, encompasses elements that make for an effective collaboration. Participants identified several factors that contribute to a successful working alliance, including role clarity, communication, willingness, vulnerability, and an established relationship. This underscores the need for school professionals to recognize the factors needed to establish and maintain a strong working alliance. Doctor (SC) emphasized the key to establishing an effective collaboration is building a relationship. She stated, "I think that our relationship is the foundation. We probably wouldn't be able to get anything done if we didn't have that relationship." Relationships establish trust and allow for better communication and teamwork. Other essential factors that influence a successful working alliance are willingness, vulnerability, and communication. Counselor1 (SC) mentioned:

The most important piece is the willingness of the other parties to collaborate. I have been in a few scenarios that were kind of short-lived, and there wasn't that willingness, and it was tough to make progress. You have to be willing to work with others and sometimes that requires people to be vulnerable. It requires a lot of willingness but also strong communication skills.

Participants also implied role clarity was necessary for effective collaboration in schools. Clarifying roles ensures professionals understand

their responsibilities and how they can contribute to the success of students. Karen (SC) shared, “Not having those defined roles of who is going to do what or who is responsible for what part causes problems. The biggest thing is making sure [everyone] understands their roles. Knowing the roles and communication are the two big ones. They are the foundation for everything else happening.”

Theme 3: Advantages of Teamwork

The third theme, *advantages of teamwork*, highlights participants’ awareness of the perceived benefits of teamwork. Nearly all participants’ experiences implied that teamwork provided positive outcomes for students and also benefited them professionally. Holly (SBMHC) described how collaborating with a team of professionals helped to identify the mental health and educational needs of a student and provided access to essential accommodations:

We finally got him in for testing through the school for an IEP. We’ve seen so much improvement, like he’s got certain accommodations that help him. Through testing, we were able to figure out all of those little minor details. I would say a mix of therapy, teachers being on board with the accommodations, and his psychiatrist contributed to this positive outcome. It’s really been a combination of everything, and he is a prime example of [the outcome of] collaboration.

Similarly, Systemic (SBMHC) shared, “We look at 3 components: attendance, discipline, and grades. Attendance increased and they graduated. ... A 98% success rate is not me alone. That successful rate is all of us working together.” This underscores the influence of school professionals working together to identify student needs to increase student success.

Collaboration benefits students, but it also benefits professionals who are working together. Most of the participants acknowledged an increase in their competency due to working with other school-based professionals. Collaboration fosters knowledge and skill development, as professionals can learn from each other and use that knowledge to

effectively help students. For example, Lena (SSW) shared, “The school counselor has given me feedback on how I write IEPs. This has helped me to develop into a more effective school social worker and given me support and made me feel more capable.” School counselors shared that collaborating with school social workers increased their awareness and knowledge of community resources. Counselor1 (SC) stated, “I’ve learned more about the school social worker role and community resources that are available. It has really helped me to determine when I would collaborate with a social worker.” Karen (SC) echoed similar experiences regarding learning about local resources available to support students and their families: “I learned about different resources for students who are experiencing homelessness. School social workers tend to know more about resources. I’ve learned a lot about attendance [laws], supports, and resources in the community.”

Theme 4: Challenges in Collaborating

The fourth theme, *challenges in collaborating*, highlights the numerous challenges participants encountered when working together. We grouped the majority of the challenges into three subthemes. The subthemes include role clarity, access, and administrative support.

Role Clarity

In the first subtheme, *role clarity*, participants often described incidents that reflect a misunderstanding of the roles and responsibilities of school professionals. School counselors are equipped to support the social/emotional needs of students. However, some participants shared that this is inconsistent in practice. School counselors are often deemed not equipped or competent to address the mental health needs of students, despite short-term counseling and crisis intervention being identified by ASCA as appropriate duties for school counselors. This dismissive act and lack of clarity surrounding competency has the potential to impact opportunities to collaborate with professionals to address student needs. Doctor (SC) shared:

We are very grateful to have social workers helping us with mental health issues that our students experience. However, we (counselors) are often overlooked in the mental health processes for our students. Per district protocol, if we have a student who comes to us with a crisis, we have to refer them to the social worker. I'm qualified to work with this kiddo It's really sad to have to tell my kiddo if you're thinking about self-harm, I have to send you upstairs. I'm not allowed to give a [risk] assessment.

Similarly, Safe space (SSW) described the breakdown in shared responsibilities between her and the school counselor as a barrier to supporting the mental health needs of students: "Counseling a student about suicide is a social worker job. Sometimes that collaboration doesn't go very well. I think the blurredness about her role focusing on academia and her saying my role is more in mental health causes separation." The misunderstanding of the roles and responsibilities of school professionals also expands to parents. Naomi (SC) reported, "Sometimes collaboration backfires because you'll hear from families — why did you involve the social worker? They have a stigma in the community, and you have to educate families on what the social worker in the school actually does." This further emphasizes the importance of defining the roles and responsibilities of school professionals to reduce confusion and conflict among professionals that could negatively impact students.

Access

In the second subtheme, *access*, participants described difficulties in collaborating due to limited access or lack of access to each other. Some participants implied a shortage of school-based mental health providers. This challenge impacts both school professionals and students. Lena (SSW) reported, "Unfortunately, the funding that had the mental health counselor was cut. We are dividing up the caseload, and that's been kind of a big stressor. It's just not enough providers [to meet] the need." Others also hinted at limited access to school professionals, but due to sharing them with other

schools. Counselor1 (SC) reported, "A current struggle is not having daily access to the social worker." Similarly, Rose (SC) shared, "We share him [the school social worker] with another school. Sometimes he's at the other school and that's a challenge." Having a staff shortage in schools can lead to unmet student needs and increase pressure on professionals.

Administrative Support

In the third subtheme, *administrative support*, some participants described issues such as flaws in the referral process, which creates barriers for both school professionals and students. Some participants expressed frustration due to a lack of support when addressing student needs. This lack of support connects to flaws in the district protocol. Lena (SSW) shared, "A structured referral process for all the different providers would be nice. I get resentful if I'm taking on more because I happen to be available." Another disconnect in the referral process is the follow-up. Natalia (SC) shared:

Unfortunately, I wish we had more involvement in the intake process because that seems to be where there's a big disconnect. Based on the numbers I've seen from the district, high school students and middle school students are more successful in setting up their [mental] health appointments. Elementary school students, of course, because of their age it is harder for this to go into practice and be effective. Also, the parents need support with the intake process, and we are not allowed to [help]. Once we send out the referral, they are responsible [for following up]. This piece really makes it difficult for our elementary school kids to benefit from mental health [services].

Theme 5: Recommendations to Improve Collaborative Practices

The fifth theme, *recommendations to improve collaborative practices*, captures the recurring suggestion to improve collaboration among school professionals. While all participants indicated the importance of collaboration and the positive impact

on students, they frequently expressed the need for staff and administrators to understand the role of school professionals for ongoing collaboration to be effective. This recommendation is derived from several participants, mostly school counselors, who are tasked with inappropriate duties and are underutilized in supporting the mental health needs of students. Counselor1 (SC) stated:

It would be helpful for administrators to have a better understanding of these various support roles I think if the leaders in the building had more understanding and just more knowledge and training about these roles, [we] could be better used in the building and therefore better support students and families I think people are more willing to listen to you and respect the role and work collaboratively if they understand what you're there for, what you can do, and what you know.

Discussion

This study explored the collaborative experiences of school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers who work in K–12 schools. The findings are consistent with previous research on collaboration, which describes the positive impact of collaboration on students (Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Oehrtman, 2022), challenges faced by professionals related to the role and responsibilities of school professionals (Appling et al., 2019; Lenares-Solomon, 2019; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Rumping et al., 2019), and recommendations for ways to improve collaborative practices (Appling et al., 2019; Oehrtman, 2022; Rumping et al., 2019; Staton & Gilligan, 2003). Results from this study add to the literature by identifying additional advantages and challenges in collaborating with school professionals.

All participants described ways they collaborate with school professionals to support the various needs of students and their families. Examples of activities include but are not limited to school counselors facilitating 504 plans, which according to ASCA is an inappropriate duty (ASCA, 2019);

consulting with each other during professional learning community (PLC) meetings or district meetings; cofacilitating small groups; linking students and families to community mental health resources; suicide prevention programming and conducting suicide assessments; and consulting on student mental health treatment and critical incidents. These services provided by school-based professionals further illustrate the needs of students and families and the integral role each school-based professional plays in working together to support students and increase student success. The ideal outcome for collaborating is changed behavior. This was illustrated in the findings as many professionals reported using their expertise and working together to address student needs. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that collaboration is necessary to foster change in students (Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Oehrtman, 2022).

Another finding from the study that supports previous research is the factors that contribute to a successful collaboration. Participants identified positive factors that enhance collaboration, including role clarity, communication, willingness, vulnerability, and a strong relationship. Clear communication and clarity in roles and responsibilities help to ensure professionals understand their responsibilities and reduce role ambiguity (Appling et al., 2020; Lenares-Solomon, 2019). Many participants also identified role clarity as a challenging factor. Numerous studies have identified role clarity as a factor in effective collaboration or a challenge in collaborating (Appling et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2023; Lenares-Solomon, 2019; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Rumping et al., 2019).

Appling et al. (2019) explored the collaborative experiences of school counselors and clinical mental health counselors and found that many participants believed a clear understanding of the role of school counselors and the school system was needed for a successful collaboration. Similarly, Moran and Bodenhorn (2015) explored school counselors' collaboration with mental health providers and identified role clarity as a barrier to collaboration because providers lack a clear

understanding of the role and responsibilities of school counselors. However, ASCA (2019) clearly outlines the roles, responsibilities, and appropriate duties of school counselors. Therefore, it is crucial that school counselors communicate their roles and appropriate duties with school-based professionals (Christian & Brown, 2018; Lambie et al., 2019). School counselors are certified/licensed professionals trained to recognize and identify mental health needs and provide short-term therapy, but due to time constraints, they must refer students to other mental health counselors for long-term therapy (ASCA, 2019; Christian & Brown, 2018). Furthermore, school counselors can and should engage in collaboration with mental health providers to provide additional support to students in schools.

Two participants shared stories that contradict what ASCA has identified as appropriate duties of a school counselor. Many school counselors shared that they were responsible for facilitating 504 plans, which contradicts ASCA's stance that facilitating 504 plans is an inappropriate duty for school counselors (ASCA, 2019). Instead of facilitating these meetings, school counselors must advocate for students at 504 meetings (ASCA, 2019). One participant shared being left out of tasks related to mental health, such as responding to crises and conducting suicide assessments. School counselors are trained and equipped to provide crisis response (ASCA, 2019; Christian & Brown, 2018; Lambie et al., 2019), conduct suicide assessments (Gallo & Wachter Morris, 2022), and serve on teams that respond to students at risk for suicide (ASCA, 2020). Keller and Grumbach (2023) emphasize the importance of being clear about roles and responsibilities, as they may overlap and vary by school. Additionally, the authors highlighted clear and open communication as the best strategy for providing effective services to students.

Other factors found in the study that make for an effective collaboration and align with previous research is the willingness to collaborate and the need to build a strong relationship. Professionals must be open to working with other school professionals. Before this can occur, professionals

must have a clear understanding of the need to work together (Rumping et al., 2019). Lastly, strong relationships need to be established with professionals for effective collaboration to occur. Research has suggested that the foundation of any relationship is mutual trust (Altshuler, 2003; Lalayants, 2013). Moran and Bodenhorn (2015) explored school counselors' collaboration with mental health providers, and participants identified relationship building as a component of effective collaboration. Participants were able to build those relationships at professional meetings. Therefore, school professionals should work on building a relationship to develop mutual trust.

As previously shared, findings from the study indicated positive outcomes for students when school professionals collaborate. Findings from this study add to the literature by identifying additional benefits of collaboration. The school counselor participants implied collaborating with school social workers increased their awareness and knowledge of community resources. School social workers are tasked with understanding the community environment, a space that students and their families occupy outside of school (Keller & Grumbach, 2023). None of the previous studies on school-based collaboration identified professional benefits of collaborating.

Aside from role confusion, participants identified other challenges such as access and flaws in administrative protocols for referring students to services. Participants expressed issues related to the accessibility of school-based mental health providers. For example, several participants shared a shortage of SBMHCs, particularly due to a lack of funding. Christian and Brown (2018) described a few barriers to mental health services in schools, including a lack of sustainability and limited funding. This is concerning given that students who need mental health support are far more likely to receive it at school (King-White, 2019). Christian and Brown (2018) also shared that school-based mental health services increase access to and reduce stigma for students receiving mental health services. These authors further suggest strategies to address this shortage, such as school administrators seeking

state and federal funding connected to the Social Security Act, the IDEA and Section 504, Public Health Service Act, Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, and Medicaid. Lastly, some participants implied that administrative protocols for referring students to services is flawed. When working together to meet the needs of students, protocols set by administrators must allow for effective collaboration. This finding adds to the literature by identifying an additional challenge faced by professionals when working together to support students.

The last theme reflected ways to improve collaborative practices. This theme connects back to the main challenge participants experienced when collaborating, which is role clarity. Participants frequently expressed the need for staff and administrators to understand the role of school professionals for ongoing collaboration to be effective. This is consistent with findings from other studies that recommended school professionals learn about various roles and responsibilities across disciplines (Appling et al., 2019; Oehrtman, 2022; Rumping et al., 2019; Staton & Gilligan, 2003). Educating school professionals on the roles of their counterparts is mutually beneficial to all professionals (Gonzales et al., 2022).

While key findings from this study mirror findings from previous studies on collaborative experiences of school professionals, our study did not present challenges such as time constraints. Previous studies (Davis et al., 2023; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015; Staton & Gilligan, 2003) identified time constraints as a barrier to collaboration. Only one or two participants hinted at their heavy workload. Given the numerous duties of school professionals, it was surprising to find that time constraint was not a barrier to collaboration in schools.

Implications

The findings from this study offer insight into interdisciplinary collaborations in schools and provide counselor educators with ideas on how to integrate interdisciplinary preparation in counseling

programs. All three school-based professionals play an integral role in supporting students holistically. We propose two main implications, one focusing on counselor education training programs and the other on school-based professionals and their school districts.

Training programs can offer counseling students unique opportunities to explore interdisciplinary practices. Interdisciplinary personnel preparation provides counselors-in-training the opportunity to “learn together and receive training with embedded, collaborative learning experiences that replicate the problem-solving teams in actual school settings” (Foxy & Anderson, 2020, p. 5). In doing so, professionals deepen their understanding of roles within schools and share their expertise through clinical experiences that promote consultation and collaboration (Foxy & Anderson, 2020). For example, counseling and social work programs can collaborate to identify specific courses that students can take together that will enable them to learn specific knowledge and skills in each other’s discipline (e.g., consultation in schools, diagnosis and treatment planning, and social work practice with communities). These courses provide the opportunity for students to gain awareness of each other’s roles and responsibilities, and develop the necessary skills to meet the needs of students and families.

On a smaller scale, counselor educators can share knowledge about other specialty counseling tracks and disciplines in preexisting counseling courses. For example, counselor educators can discuss the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers in the professional counseling orientation and ethics course. Additionally, counselor educators can develop assignments that will enable students to learn about school-based professionals, such as interviewing school professionals. Also, counselor educators can invite each school-based professional to their class to discuss their roles and responsibilities in schools and the ways they collaborate to support students and their families. Collaboration can also be discussed during practicum and internship. Counselor educators can

encourage students to collaborate with school-based professionals during field experience and provide time during supervision to discuss their experiences and resolve any potential challenges. Appling et al. (2019) suggested that collaboration can be promoted through a series of shared opportunities, including courses, projects, and fieldwork experiences. The previously mentioned examples support some of the findings from the study by allowing school-based professionals to understand the role and responsibility of each professional and promote factors that influence effective collaboration (role clarity, relationship, communication).

School-based professionals can use the findings from this study to promote effective collaboration. For example, school counselors can advocate for appropriate duties in the school and clarify their role to SBMHCs and school social workers. Furthermore, school-based professionals can find time to discuss ways they can effectively collaborate to best serve the needs of students. Jordan (2022) suggested professionals participate in professional learning communities (PLC) to allow school professionals to collaborate and perpetuate student learning. School-based professionals can also use the specific challenges found in the study (e.g., shortage of SBMHCs and flaws in the referral process) to advocate for changes in the school district, as these changes will benefit students by providing them equitable access to school-based mental health services.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, only two SBMHCs and one male school professional participated in this study. Future studies should include more SBMHCs and male school professionals because they might offer different or additional perspectives. Second, this study focused on three specific school-based professionals. Future studies should include other school-based mental health professionals who support the mental health needs of students, such as school psychologists. It will be beneficial to

understand the experiences of school psychologists given many participants mentioned working with psychologists to coordinate services (e.g., testing).

Another limitation is the location of the schools. Many of the participants worked in suburban schools, which traditionally offer more resources than urban and rural communities and schools. The school setting could potentially impact the experiences of school-based professionals as they work together to meet the needs of students. We recommend that future studies include more school professionals from different geographical settings.

Conclusion

This study explored the collaborative experiences of school counselors, SBMHCs, and school social workers who work in K–12 schools. Findings from this study provide insight into the collaborative experiences of school professionals and provide counselor educators with ideas on how to integrate interdisciplinary preparation in counseling programs. Collaboration is an expectation of school-based professionals working in K–12 schools and despite challenges that arise in collaborating, collaboration is essential in meeting the holistic needs of students.



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