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A Phenomenological Study of Federally Funded School Counselor Educators' Nondual Educator-Counselor and Antiracist School Counselor Identity

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Abstract

School counselor educators train future professionals who will adopt a nondual educator-counselor identity and deliver direct services to culturally diverse students and other education stakeholders. To capture select school counselor educators' values and practices, the authors of the current study performed a descriptive phenomenological study using semi-structured interview questions to elicit the experiences of six school counselor educators who received federal funding to increase the diversity and quality of mental health services in public schools. Findings included the following five themes: (a) perspectives of professional identity; (b) equity, social justice, and inclusion; (c) pedagogical strategies in training program; (d) collaboration and partnerships; and (e) rewards and challenges in counseling education. Implications related to counselor education and future research are discussed.

Significance to the Public

We conducted a qualitative study to understand the perspectives of six federally funded school counselor educators' professional identities, specific training priorities, and practices under the MHSP Demonstration Grant. This study highlights the urgency to appreciate equity, justice, and complex societal and institutional influences on training and practice.

Keywords: antiracism, counselor education, educator-counselor, school counselors

School counselors are embedded in educational settings where they have access to students and related adult stakeholders across various contexts and over extended periods of time (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024). In this way, they are uniquely able to provide preventative and culturally responsive education and mental health services (Kim et al., in press). Unfortunately, many school counselors are often underutilized and get encumbered in ancillary and administrative tasks, and are therefore inhibited from fully offering the types of direct service intended to advance student and school outcomes (Blake, 2020; Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2018). Role confusion and misuse are especially noteworthy, considering that

school counseling interventions contribute to desirable learning and social outcomes for students and improved teaching behaviors and climate in schooling contexts (Kim et al., 2024). Therefore, it is incumbent on school counseling training programs to provide learning opportunities to trainees that accommodate the academic and social needs of culturally diverse PK–12 students while at the same time providing practical instruction intended to challenge and improve various social structures that impede education systems.

In response to the role confusion and misuse that school counselors face, DeKruyf et al. (2013) proposed a professional identity for school counselors, embracing both the roles of educational

leader and mental health professional. More recently, Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) proposed that school counselors maintain a nondual educator-counselor identity, explaining that “reshaping the narrative to suggest that school counselors are situated as educators who are oriented by counseling has the potential to mitigate much of the role ambiguity that has persisted in the profession for decades and, more important, has the potential to sharpen practice and contribute to greater student and schoolwide outcomes” (p. 2). The nondual educator-counselor identity is associated with various phenomena pertinent to K–12 students, the profession of school counseling, and schools, not limited to growth in students’ social and emotional development (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021), student suicide prevention (Wachter Morris et al., 2021), school–family–community partnerships (Henry & Bryan, 2021), and teacher collaborations (Limberg et al., 2021).

School counselor training can be influenced by values internal to the profession or responsive to perceived needs in the various systems that school counselors serve. In a phenomenological study of 29 school counselor educators, Betters-Bubon and colleagues (2021) reported profound variance in identity positions amongst school counselor training faculty, including some who reported a conjoined identity akin to an educator-counselor identity, whereas other participants suggested that they held an educator-first, counselor-first, or confused identity. While there is a diversity of identity postures for school counselor educators, there does seem to be a consensus that they feel underresourced and undervalued in training programs. This agreement is dubious for school counselor educators and trainees, yet there is some evidence that trainees are developing appropriate acumen, especially self-awareness, culturally relevant counseling skills, and emerging advocacy skills as reported by students who were supported by school counselor trainees (Cook et al., 2019). Considered together, school counselor training must continue to reflect and adjust to internal and external demands while maintaining diverse student and school needs at the center.

For most students, schools offer the greatest access to mental health resources, as students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based facilities compared to community settings (Juszczak et al., 2003). Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) found that school counselors have similar influences on achievement compared to increasing the teacher quality for each educator in a school and is more than twice as influential on whole school outcomes such as employing a new teacher. Longitudinal and large-scale data drawn show that school counselors have desirable effects on areas such as student achievement, attendance, and discipline, particularly for culturally diverse, low-income, or academically challenged students (Domina et al., 2022; Mulhern, 2020). Lastly, recognizing the pivotal role that school-based mental health providers play in providing culturally response services, the U.S. Department of Education has allocated resources, such as the Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant Program, to enhance support services within school settings.

The importance of well-trained culturally responsive school counselors is critical to the support of student and educational systems, evinced by the fact that schooling performance and mental health are inextricably related (Agnafors et al., 2021). In a content analysis of 45 school counseling intervention articles published in counseling related journals from 2002 to 2023, Kim and colleagues (2024) found that 20 (44.4%) of the studies included both social or emotional and academic outcomes. For example, Lemberger-Truelove and colleagues (2018) evaluated the effects of school counselor facilitated classroom intervention on the executive functioning, feelings of connectedness, and achievement on a state-mandated achievement test for 193 predominately Hispanic-identifying 7th graders in participating Title I schools. Mediation results from a longitudinal multilevel model demonstrated how the school counseling intervention contributed to development in both students’ personal functioning and learning performance. The findings in this one example echo the broader trends across the various studies assessed by Kim and colleagues (2024);

specifically, culturally appropriate school counseling interventions are pertinent to mental health and learning outcomes, which inferentially endorses the educator-counselor lens for school counselors.

While school counselors can provide potentially effectual support to all students and the adult educators in their lives, an emergent trend in literature highlights the particular importance of antiracist school counselor training and practice (e.g., Griffin & Steen, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). In a Delphi study of expert school counselors, directors, and counselor educators, Stickl Haugen and colleagues (2021) identified 180 items across five categories including specific aspects of awareness, attitudes, knowledge, characteristics, and behaviors necessary to confront racism and promote equity in schools. Challenging some racial presuppositions and biases appears to be imperative in counselor education settings, exemplified by causal comparative findings by Paone and colleagues (2015), who found that 121 White counseling students experienced growth in White racial identity development, White privilege, color blindness, and the costs of racism after exposure to an experiential, race-based graduate course. Coupled with a nondual educator-counselor identity, a focus on antiracist and social justice training might better empower school counselors to challenge systems that limit their roles in schools and contribute more culturally relevant support to students and educators. To this end, the purpose of the current study was to ascertain the priorities and practices of select school counselor educators deemed well-positioned to promote the school counselor professional identity and related antiracist values.

Method

Over the last few years, the U.S. Department of Education funded more than 90 investigation teams to increase the number of well-trained school-based mental health professionals, including a focus on amplifying the number of well-trained and

culturally diverse school counselors in economically challenged school contexts. This funding opportunity — the Office of Safe & Supportive Schools: Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant — focused on the following areas: (a) increasing the number of school-based mental health providers, especially in regions where the ratio of providers is out of step with the broader community (e.g., state ratios, ASCA recommended ratios); (b) aligning the dispositional characteristics of school-based mental health providers with the composition of the affiliated school districts (e.g., ethnic distributions, linguistic diversity); and (c) the delivery of evidence-supported pedagogical practices in the training of school-based mental health providers. Given the inclusion of professional school counselor trainees in this funding opportunity, members of the current research team were interested in the training priorities of selecting school counselor educator recipients of the MHSP funds.

To study the program training processes of select federally funded school counselor educators, including professional identities and the quality of future school counselors, we selected Moustakas' (1994) phenomenology design, intending to provide a rich understanding of participants' experiences. A descriptive phenomenological approach is common when there is a paucity of prior related studies (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Three primary research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What perceptions pertaining to a nonhierarchical educator-counselor identity do select investigators who received funding under the MHSP Demonstration Grant possess in relationship to their training of future school counselors?

RQ2: What perceptions do select investigators who received MHSP Demonstration Grant funding possess related to antiracist and social justice school counselor training?

RQ3: What beliefs about school counseling specific curriculum and pedagogical practices do investigators who received MHSP Demonstration Grant funding hold?

Participants

Researchers used purposive criteria sampling to recruit participants, employing the following participant inclusion criteria: (a) are above 18 years old; (b) have received the Safe & Supportive Schools: Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant during the 2022 or 2023 grant cycles; and (c) are a school counselor educator affiliated with a counselor training program accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). To recruit potential participants, the research team sent an email explaining the purpose of the study to all MHSP teams. For those potential participants who responded to the initial recruitment email, they were provided a follow-up email that included the consent documents, the semi-structured interview questions for the study, and a Zoom meeting link. The facilitators used pseudonyms throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality.

Six counselor educators from six different universities met the inclusion criteria and consented to participate. Six participants are within the appropriate range for phenomenological designs (Hays & Wood, 2011) and resulted in sufficient saturation for the current study after careful analysis of the data. All six participants identified as female; five participants identified as White and one identified as an African American. Three participants classified their institutions as research institutions ($R1 = 2$; $R2 = 1$), whereas two identified their institutions as teaching institutions, and one identified it as a hybrid. On average, these six counselor educators reported 10.5 years of experience as a counselor educator (Range: 7–15, $SD = 3.26$).

Data Collection Procedures

This study had three phases that began after receiving institutional board approval from the University of North Texas (IRB-23-375). In Phase I, the researchers sent recruitment emails and informed consent documents to an investigator affiliated with a Safe & Supportive Schools: Mental

Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant award. The names and university affiliations of these investigators are publicly accessible. Following consent, participants provided a pseudonym for use throughout the study.

Phase II involved participants completing a semi-structured Zoom interview with each participant. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of five open-ended questions pertaining to participants' perceptions of a nonhierarchical educator-counselor identity, perceptions of antiracist and social justice school counseling training, and beliefs about school counseling specific curriculum and pedagogical practices under the MHSP Demonstration Grant. All participants were asked the following questions:

Please describe your perceptions of a nonhierarchical educator-counselor identity as an investigator who received funding under the MHSP Demonstration Grant.

Please describe your perceptions of antiracist and social justice in school counseling training as an investigator who received funding under the MHSP Demonstration Grant.

Please describe your beliefs about school counseling specific curriculum and pedagogical practices as an investigator who received funding under the MHSP Demonstration Grant.

Among your experiences advocating for a nondual educator-counselor school counselor identity while receiving the MHSP Demonstration Grant, what is/was something that you feel/felt most frustrated about?

Among your experiences advocating for a nondual educator-counselor school counselor identity while receiving the MHSP Demonstration Grant, what is/was something that you feel/felt [was] most rewarding?

Follow-up questions were asked to ensure clarity and to expand the discussion when necessary. The interviews lasted 49 minutes, on average (Range: 42–60, $SD = 6.75$). These interviews were video-recorded and audio-recorded, and transcribed.

Lastly, Phase III of the data collection procedure involved a member check. Participants reviewed an emailed transcript of their interview for accuracy, general messages, and concepts. Participants were also invited to expand on topics if desired. Two of the six participants confirmed the accuracy of the interview by submitting edits and feedback to interview summaries.

The first author conducted all interviews, completed each interview transcript manually, and completed the initial cycles of data analysis (open, inductive, and deductive coding). The second author focused on a second cycle of data analysis based on the initial codes provided by the first author (inductive and deductive coding, and triangulation with the relevant theory-informed literature). The entire data analysis was carried out manually, and no computer software was utilized in the data analyses.

Data Analysis

Applying Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological guiding principles, our descriptive analysis commenced with both researchers bracketing their experiences as a nondual educator-counselor and antiracist school counselor identity. The first author extensively reviewed the interview recordings to enhance familiarity with the participants' intended meanings, to identify meanings within each sentence, and to obtain a sense of the whole. A comprehensive rereading of interview transcripts was undertaken to ensure a holistic consideration of participant experiences before advancing with the categorization process. The first author generated the researcher memos and marks after the transcripts were reread to determine significant statements (meaning units), emphasizing participants' descriptions and critical insights. Using the method of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994), both researchers clustered and transformed invariant meaning units into psychological and descriptive expressions. Finally, a textural-structural description was discussed and formulated into five main topics (professional identity, social justice, pedagogical strategies,

collaboration and partnerships, and rewards and challenges).

Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of analysis were established, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The second author, with experience as an elementary and secondary school counselor and employed for 17 years as a school counselor educator, increased the credibility of the data analyses. We utilized research team discussions and note-taking as reflexivity tools to monitor our assumptions. To maintain confirmability, a single member check was conducted, allowing participants to review transcripts and provide feedback, ensuring accuracy and alignment with their perspectives. Regarding transferability and dependability, we provided thick description and a detailed description of information on recruitment, participants, data collection methods, analysis, and findings.

The epoché of the research team includes all efforts to bracket biases and engage in the data authentically (Giorgi, 2012). The first author is a second-year doctoral student in a counselor education program, with educational and clinical experiences as a school counselor trainee. The second author is a counselor educator with 17 years of experience, current MHSP Demonstration Grant recipient, and former school counselor in elementary and high schools. Throughout the entirety of the study, including development of the design, analyses of the data, and reporting of the findings, the authors discussed their presupposed beliefs pertaining to school counselor identity, antiracist education and counseling, and the broader school counseling profession.



Findings

We identified five emergent themes emanating from the participating counselor educators, including: (a) perspectives of professional identity; (b) equity, social justice, and inclusion; (c) pedagogical

strategies in training program; (d) collaboration and partnerships; and (e) rewards and challenges in counseling education. These themes coalesce into a broader finding pertaining to how school counselor educators approach training, that is, school counseling training and practice is simultaneously the experiences of the individual (i.e., school counselor trainee, K–12 student) and the systems people operate (i.e., graduate programs, schools, and larger societal systems), as consistent with educator-counselor identity (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021).

Perspectives of Professional Identity

In this theme, all participants articulated their perspectives relative to an ever-evolving landscape of school counselor identity. Generally, all six participants embraced some version of a nondual educator-counselor identity for school counselor training, although there were differing magnitudes of priority for the identity of counselor or educator across the six respondents. For example, Polly articulated a greater emphasis on the mental health and counseling aspect of school counselor identity, exemplified by her suggesting, “All of my training definitely emphasized the counseling aspect and not the educator aspect It was always counseling-focused and there was this push to, you know, to be as counselor-focused as possible.” In a similar way, Sunny placed significant importance on the counselor identity with the quote, “I’ve always viewed school counselors as counselors first, and that counselor identity and the term *school counselor* is very important to me.” Alternatively, Sarah suggested a more proportionate and interconnectedness school counselor identity when she stated, “They [mental health counseling, school counseling, and career counseling] all intersect, under the umbrella of professional counselor.”

All six participants expressed the vital role of school counselors, highlighting the underutilized tasks and the integral connection between mental health and overall student well-being. Polly expressed concerns of what school counselors need to do in their jobs and pointed out the administrative tasks that school counselors are often asked to do:

“We surveyed school counselors in the southeast United States. We got a huge response rate a couple of years ago and over 80% of school counselors are doing testing, which is the norm of this job.” However, Marley articulated a dual responsibility of responding to student and school community needs while also embracing an educator role: “I see us responding to students and school community needs, but I also see us providing to the best of our ability the knowledge and skill sets that we can through more of an educator role as well.” Olivia identified herself as both a counselor and an educator and shared her interest in the intersection of college and career readiness and mental health needs:

I see myself as both a counselor and as an educator. I see myself as a school counselor; my training and background are as a school counselor So, our beliefs are that we can’t just isolate children to sort of academic and career development because I don’t think you can talk about college and career readiness without talking about mental health and wellness that students experience.

Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion

All participants suggested that there are clear examples of antiracist and social justice practices in their training programs, especially how they used the MHSP Demonstration Grant to advance equity and inclusion in student body composition and instructional or experiential practices. Polly recalled an incident in which one of the school staff profiled a Black female student who went into school to view the classroom guidance lessons. She also shared how the program supported this student by exploring more open conversations. Sophia reported inviting speakers from diverse minority identities to enhance students’ awareness: “With this demonstration grant, we incorporate learning institutes and we’ve invited speakers who come from different minorities identities, whether it be racial, ethnically, minoritized LGBTQ and other identities.” Marley described her commitment to deeply incorporating equity and justice-focused

work into her identity as a school counselor and educator:

I think for us being positioned in the southwest United States ... if I didn't deeply identify with and incorporate equity and justice-focused work into who I am as a school counselor and school counselor educator, I wouldn't be where I am. Like it doesn't fit well. So, it doesn't feel that what, and maybe this isn't answering your question, but I think the mental health services like our MHSP projects, what it's doing most, as I mentioned already, is providing an opportunity for people in our community that ultimately are going to be the best school counselors for our community because they are from our community. They want to give back to their community.

Participants shared the significance of their approaches in creating a more inclusive and diverse environment within the school counseling field. Polly shared her belief in equity and antiracism in counseling:

The more and more that we talk about it and it's shared and it's written, and it's described from a meta-level, more open students are and even just more honest and not just kind of just brief and just kind of sharing superficial aspects of it.

Similarly, Sarah discussed the efforts to promote cultural competence in counseling education, focusing on raising awareness of social-cultural issues and encouraging open discussions in class: "The more that we can blend student experiences and help them talk these things out, the better that we're going to be able to attract and retain diversity and bring more people of color into the field."

Other participants expressed specific practices when implementing their training to school counseling students who are more socially just and antiracist-minded. Sunny provided her viewpoint on incorporating social justice principles into Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS):

So, I really appreciate the tiered, but then when I came across the frameworks that include tier 0, thinking about, okay, not every student is

coming into the school setting at the same place with the same resources with the same access to resources.

Polly recalled her practices in the broaching model to ground it in cultural responsiveness:

I feel like especially with topics related to antiracism, social justice, it's more important not to just say the words, but to show some examples of it, and that's just a nice way, because I think students, they don't really know maybe what it sounds like.

In summary, this theme demonstrated participants' collective commitment to fostering inclusivity and diversity in the field of school counseling. The utilization of the MHSP Demonstration Grant as a catalyst for promoting equity in students is exemplified by various practices. Whether through recognizing racism's educational impact, inviting speakers from diverse backgrounds, or deeply incorporating equity and justice-focused work into their identities as educators, these participants demonstrate consistent efforts to foster inclusivity in their grant and training programs. These practices highlight the participants' collective dedication to cultivating a socially just and antiracist mindset among school counseling students, with each offering unique insights into effective strategies and considerations within their respective training approaches.

Pedagogical Strategies in Training Program

In this theme, all participants discussed their beliefs of the ontology of school counseling as a unique component of mental health delivery in their training programs. Five of the six participants shared that the mental health training piece is already embedded within their curriculum, which did not change their regular curriculum. One reported that their program was rewriting their curriculum to make it more equitable. Sophia, as a department chair, provided her viewpoint on the department mission and vision and how it practically aligns with the training program:

It starts even from the admission process, really in the orientation, and getting students to be thinking about their development in terms of cultural humility, multicultural competency, and antiracist practices ... and then when they're going into field work ... they have folks that work in their district that might be paraprofessionals that they're really interested in then becoming school counselors.

In one of the counseling courses that Olivia is teaching, students have to complete three recordings. In their third tape, the focus is on broaching cultural differences. Olivia reported their therapeutic relationships changed immediately in that third session, and she reflected on how it can impact the school counseling context:

Children who experienced trauma [are] going to be shaped by their intersectional identities whether it is race, gender, class, sexual orientation; and as counselors, we can't provide children an adequate service if we don't understand what it means to be questioning as a minority student in a school culture.

Notably, participants shared the challenges faced by school counseling students in dual track programs. Sunny expressed concerns when listening to and addressing school counseling students' struggles: "How are our peers in clinical mental health not really understanding the important work we do?" To improve and advocate school counseling students' efficacy, participants discussed the uniqueness of the school counselor, with an emphasis on how prevention, development, and wellness oftentimes gets left out in the curriculum. For instance, school counselors cultivate various skills through direct services such as antibullying guidance lessons, social-emotional learnings, and stress management. Polly shared, "You're not going to have the perfectly scheduled 50 minutes session, but you can engage the counseling skills you learned whenever you are in bus or lunch duty." Similarly, Sunny shared, "We have such an ability as school counselors to understand who is getting that support and who is the student that is isolated or being targeted." She also championed imparting an understanding to clinical mental health students

about the intricacies of how school counselors engage clinically:

We have a seat at the table in mental health, but clinical mental health folks, there's something to be learned about the way we do clinical mental health, prevention, and intervention, that is worthy of understanding and important for you all to know as well.

Collaboration and Partnerships

In this theme, participants discussed how they collaborated with their students and partner school districts, especially under the MHSP Demonstration Grant. Consistent with creating an inclusive and equitable environment, participants emphasized the crucial ways of sharing power with students and incorporating their input and experiences. Sophia shared, "They're looking also for guidance from their faculty, but I also want to leverage their experiences and all that they have to offer and what that looks like." Likewise, Sarah advocated for student involvement in creating curriculum content to increase more voice: "Please let our students help create this content when we get to that part ... there's not as much emphasis on diversity because the curriculum was written years ago. We need more voices, informing what we're doing with students to broaden those lesson plans."

Beyond describing the collaborations with students, all participants discussed their viewpoints on working with cross-disciplines and their partner districts. Sunny shared the collaborative works with ESL teachers to meet multilingual students' needs and increase their belongingness:

How amazing is that? Like we have this pool of collaborators in our school community who we can partner with to do this work. We can build off each other's strengths. I think that that's very unique to our setting.

Olivia shared that they partnered with three districts in three different states and hoped that those districts would hire those students after the completion of their internship to meet the needs of

the school counselor shortages. Similarly, Sarah stated:

So, I think, with this money, we were able to also start to look outside of counseling identity and pull in, okay, now we also have social workers. Now we also have psychologists. How do we all work? How are we bringing them in the fold to work together to remove those barriers and provide support in a system?

Rewards and Challenges in Counseling Education

In this final theme, all participants discussed their rewarding and frustrating experiences while receiving the MHSP Demonstration Grant. Participants shared that because of the grant, they were able to recruit more school counseling students and provided as many resources as they could, such as additional supervision. Sunny shared, “We are getting services to students who would not have had them. So. It’s really cool.” Comparably, Marley stated:

So, circling back to what I said about the most rewarding part of my job right now and why I’m still doing this work, even though I’m on sabbatical, is that I get to hand out over, you know, like a quarter of a million dollars a year to students who need financial support to do the work that they were intended that they want to do, right? They want to do it in their communities, and they are the right people to do that work and so that’s the most rewarding part, is giving money to the people who are doing this work and who want to do this work and will do it well.

On the other hand, half of the participants shared their frustration with their institutions, which were ill-equipped when addressing the bureaucracy. Sarah shared, “We’re still waiting for the business office to release those funds for our students since the end of September.” Marley recalled, “Despite the fact that we were awarded in April, (university name anonymous) still does not have a contract and procurement in my Office of Research and Sponsor

Programs. ... Like a competitive discretionary grant, you’re putting our funding in jeopardy.”

Other participants discussed some other challenges faced by students when navigating internships. Sunny shared students’ difficulties in maintaining full-time employment during the internship year: “The internship thing is a puzzle because it’s just not realistic for a lot of the employees to think about taking a year off work or going down to a half-time position.” Sarah discussed the challenge of encouraging students to go to partner districts that are further away for their internship placements and the logistical concerns associated with it:

It’s a concern, and we want to really support that district. How do we get our students to be willing? They are getting a large stipend for their internship but no matter what school they go to they’ll get the same stipend. So, that’s a challenge, because we really want to support all our districts. So, it’s like a logistical challenge I guess, and we have to think about what we’ll do about that.



Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore how school counselor educators funded under a MHSP Demonstration Grant perceive nonhierarchical educator-counselor identity, antiracist and social justice focused training, and relevant pedagogical and curricular approaches to school counselor training. Results indicated that all six participants acknowledge that school counselor identity includes aspects of both counseling and education, as consistent with the nondual educator-counselor identity proffered by Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021). This said, some participants suggested that there is a greater training and practice value on the mental health counseling services directed to K–12 students and educators, especially given the outstanding needs in contemporary school environments. Emerging from the interviews was also a general consensus on the value of antiracist and social justice school

counselor training and practice (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). Additionally, the respondents each discussed the various challenges in providing thoroughgoing school counseling training, whether a function of how school counseling programs are situated in general counselor education settings or the tribulations of working with various agencies in and beyond the university and public education settings.

Students in elementary and secondary schools are exhibiting a greater number of mental health struggles, especially emerging out of the COVID pandemic (Chu & Lake, 2021). Each participant in the current study described how school counselors can serve students and schools given their unique positionality as an educator and counselor. Given that K–12 students are active members of school communities for extended periods and engage in various roles and activities (e.g., student in classrooms, peer in class, or extracurricular events), current evidence substantiates that school counselors should receive training and practice with attentiveness to schools as systems, recognizing the unique contribution of preventative mental health and educational services to ongoing development and wellness (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024; Lenz & Lemberger-Truelove, 2023). Further, given the emphasis on mental health as discussed by the participants interviewed in the current study, school counselor education programs would be wise to balance a focus on short-term counseling services endorsed by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2019) with appropriate protracted and systemic interventions typical of terminal counseling training programs (Lambie et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of well-designed school counseling intervention studies demonstrating the efficacy of professionals on student outcomes (Chen et al., 2023; Villares et al., 2023; Warwick et al., 2023). The dearth of evidence is even more dubious given the complexities of school culture and the roles and responsibilities of school counselors. To optimize the support for K–12 students and educators, it is better to adopt training, theoretical, and practice frameworks that

align specifically with the dispositions of school counselors rather than adapting and translating instruction and practice behaviors designed for allied mental health and teaching disciplines (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020).

In addition to suggestions to amplify the educator-counselor identities of school counselors, the participants expressed deliberate efforts to instill antiracist, equity, and justice-focused work within their training programs. This finding supports extant research that highlights the increasing importance of antiracist and social justice training in school counseling programs (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Stickl Haugen et al., 2021). Each participant discussed the dimensional nature of this work, including their own personal work to increase their equity and justice awareness and behaviors and how that development as an instructor affects their interactions with graduate trainees and the broader school counseling profession.

The implications for graduate training potentially challenge deeply inculcated societal and university trends. For example, many of the participants discussed how the MHSP Demonstration Grant provided opportunities to recruit and support students who might not otherwise matriculate into graduate programs given the expense and other barriers. On the one hand, it is encouraging that school counselor training programs are being recognized and financially supported to perform justice work. On the other hand, it illuminates more pervasive concerns that such federal funding opportunities are limited in scope and duration. Therefore, it is incumbent on school counselor educators to continue to seek out and secure federal and local support so that access to culturally diverse service providers will continue to expand into the future.

The third research question dealt with the perceptions of federally funded school counselor educators' experiences with pedagogy, curriculum, and the execution of funded projects. Each MHSP Demonstration Grant investigator interviewed in the current study reported varying challenges in the initiation or maintenance of their projects. Most counselor training programs are housed in

professional schools, often underresourced and underexperienced to support long-term, multimillion-dollar grants (Better-Bubon et al., 2021). While each project discussed in the interviews was commendable in its design, over half of the respondents discussed critical challenges at their university or with partnering school districts.

For many MHSP Demonstration Grant investigators, the funding application and award process occurred at a rapid pace, requiring spontaneous planning and community building. Given that school counseling occurs in various systems, it is imperative that training programs cultivate ongoing relationships within universities and with school district partners that anticipate large and modest funding or training opportunities. While most school counseling training programs are credentialed to perform site visits during practicum and internship experiences, it is advantageous to broaden relationships. Such efforts might increase the diversity of school counseling professionals, amplify the amount and quality of education and mental health counseling services delivered by extant school counselors, and even increase the number of empirical studies related to school counseling interventions in schools.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study includes limitations, including features of the empirical design. For example, each participant reported being in the preliminary stages of their various MHSP Demonstration Grant projects (e.g., year 1 of a 5-year implementation). As such, the results of the study reflect early perceptions that might evolve over the duration of their total grant-funded project. Future research might want to circle back to these same participants and inquire how their perceptions evolved after the completion of the various grant projects. Secondly, one limitation of this study is the absence of an external auditor. Future research might aim to incorporate the involvement of external auditors to enhance the robustness of the research findings. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study design is subject to biases and cannot necessarily provide insights on certain types of changes over

time. Instead, future scholars might utilize causal comparative research designs to assess how federal funding affects graduate trainees' experiences (e.g., stress) and outcomes (e.g., antiracist values).

School counseling researchers might be interested in how certain training exposures might contribute to more distal outcomes, not limited to K–12 student outcomes or the types of services delivered by practicing school counselors. While there is a tension in the school counseling literature, suggesting that school counselors are often underused or misused in schools (Blake, 2020), and yet when properly utilized they clearly contribute to desirable student or school systems outcomes (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014; Domina et al., 2022; Mulhern, 2020). Future research might consider how training sponsored by federal funding might affect the quantity and quality of school counseling services but also have downstream effects on educational and mental health outcomes.



Conclusion

Results from the current descriptive phenomenological study of six school counselor educators who received federal funding demonstrates the complexity of school counselor identity as both educators and counselors, while highlighting the urgency to appreciate equity, justice, and complex societal and institutional influences on training and practice. When empowered, school counselors have the potential to positively influence the students and schools they serve, yet it takes a firm commitment from government and training institutions to maximize this potential.



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