Identifying Beliefs about Leadership: Lifting Up Voices of School Counselors

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Abstract

In this study an effort was made to identify the views of six school counselors relative to their leadership role in the school. The study used qualitative methodology and three themes pertaining to school counselor leadership were identified, i.e., school counselors believing in a shared sense of leadership, believing in the importance of being trustworthy, and believing in persistence or endurance. Further descriptions of these themes are presented in the article.

Keywords: school counselor, leadership, qualitative, school collaboration
Identifying Beliefs about Leadership: Lifting Up Voices of School Counselors

The authors of the *American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA, 2005) encouraged school counselors to be leaders in their schools. School Counselor Performance Standard 13.3 included in the ASCA national model states, “The professional school counselor takes a leadership role within the counseling department, the school setting and the community” (p. 65). ASCA has also included leadership as part of its current ethical standards. The standard suggests that school counselors provide leadership that aids in removing barriers that prevent students from achieving their educational goals (ASCA, 2010). Additionally, Devoss and Andrews (2006) found that activities associated with leading appeared throughout the 213 Performance Standards contained in the ASCA national model, and thus it was thought that school counselors would need to have leadership skills in order to meet the standards. These leadership skills included “planning, organizing, consultation, program management, establishing and convening an advisory council, collecting and analyzing data to guide program direction and emphasis, evaluating results, conducting an annual program audit, and infusing themes of student advocacy, education reform, equity, community, teaming, and systems change into the school environment” (p. 33). Bemak (2000) wrote of school counselors undertaking leadership through collaborative endeavors within the school, agencies in the community, and families. Bemak (2000) mentioned that, “It is critical that school counselors work closely with other professionals in the school, especially in the capacity of becoming leaders in school reform, meeting educational goals, and fostering safety” (p. 327).
For the broader counseling profession, of which school counseling is a part, leadership has been described by professional organizations and researchers. Chi Sigma Iota, the international counseling profession’s academic and professional honor society wrote of 10 principles and practices for leadership (Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders for Excellence, 1999). Included in 10 principles of Chi Sigma Iota were descriptions of leaders as those in the profession who viewed and practiced leadership that was altruistic, collaborative, fiscally responsible, reflective, and respectful of organizational history and membership. Additionally, West, Osborn, and Bubenzer (2003) wrote of appreciating one’s context, establishing a vision, and utilizing action in leadership.

Others like Bennis and Nanus (2003) have investigated perspectives on leadership from corporate leaders and from leaders in the public sector. The perspectives of Bennis and Nanus may have implications for school counselors as they take on leadership activities because they commented on the significance of a vision for the organization, the importance of conveying the vision to others, the relevance of trust in leadership, and the place for positive self-regard in leadership. Likewise, Kouzes and Posner (2002) commented on practices of exemplary leaders, and they mentioned modeling behavior expected of others, inspiring others with a common vision, challenging the process of the organization, helping others to contribute to desired outcomes, and offering appreciation for contributions from others. Indeed, skills of leadership and specifically skills used by school counselors in leadership efforts are worthy of study. In the current investigation an attempt was made to lift up the voices of six school counselors regarding their views on leadership. This was done in order to
study beliefs pertaining to leadership from individuals actually serving as full-time school counselors. In order to undertake this investigation, a qualitative research design was used.

**Purpose of the Study**

The guiding question of our research was: in what ways do participants experience school counseling leadership? Through our methodology we attempted to gain an understanding related to the common experiences of the interviewed school counselors related to their leadership including their perceptions of school counseling leadership and leadership activities.

**Methodology**

A qualitative methodology was used to collect information related to participants’ conceptualizations of school counseling leadership. Patton (2002) suggested that qualitative approaches allow researchers to study topics in-depth, thus increasing understanding of the topic under consideration. The researchers used in-depth phenomenological interviews to gather information related to the participants’ experiences and conceptualizations regarding leadership. Creswell (2007) suggests that phenomenological approaches are most appropriate when the researcher is attempting to understand the essence of shared experiences of a phenomenon. In this study our participants were identified as leaders by their supervisees and it was hoped that they could provide researchers with a deeper understanding of their experiences of leadership as a school counselor. Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggested that the purpose of phenomenological interviewing is to, “describe the meaning of a concept or
phenomenon that several individuals share” (p. 148). For this research that concept would be their experiences and beliefs about school counseling leadership.

Analysis of the interview transcripts was completed in an attempt to understand the school counseling leadership experienced by participants. A content analysis was performed to inductively analyze the data gathered from the participants (Berg, 1998). These experiences were to involve how participants conceptualize school counseling leadership and how they participate in leadership activities.

**Participant Selection**

The *Leadership Rating Scale*, an instrument developed by the authors for the purpose of this investigation, was utilized to identify participants for the study. The scale was created because the researchers were unable to locate an instrument that directly related to school counselor leadership that was being proposed in the counseling profession [e.g., in the ASCA National Model (2005); Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders for Excellence (1999)]. Students enrolled in a master's degree school counseling internship course at a large Midwestern university were asked to rate their on-site supervisors using the scale. The students completing the rating scale had completed the majority of their course work and at least two courses related to school counseling, both of which included the topic of school counseling leadership and had approximately spent between 10 and 24 weeks in their internship site. Thus, the researchers believed the students would have been able to identify effective school counseling leadership in their on-site supervisors. It was believed that the time students spent in close working relationships with their on-site supervisors would provide them with enough time to adequately observe a multitude of leadership activities, if leadership
was performed, and thus be able to capably complete the survey. Potential participants included 16 licensed school counselors with a minimum of two years of post-master’s experience as on-site supervisors for students.

The *Leadership Rating Scale* included 17 items and was a Likert-type scale with one (1) representing *strongly disagree* and six (6) representing *strongly agree*. Therefore, scores could range from 17 points to 102 points. The scale items for the *Leadership Rating Scale* included general questions involving leadership, for example, “My on-site supervisor acts as a leader in his/her school building,” as well as items derived from the *ASCA National Model* (ASCA, 2005), for example, “My on-site supervisor advocates for students” and “My on-site supervisor has an advisory council or those that he/she collaborates with in implementing the school counseling program”. Additionally items were derived from the professional literature, for example, “My on-site supervisor seeks feedback from others relative to his/her performance through formal methods” (Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders for Excellence, 1999; Drucker, 1999; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Senge, 1999) and “My on-site supervisor takes an active part in professional organizations related to counseling or education” (Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders for Excellence, 1999; Osborn, West, Bubenzer, Duba, & Olson, 2003).

The scores for each on-site supervisor were added to provide a cumulative score of which the top six scorers were identified and invited to participate in the second part of the study, the interview portion. The scores for all 16 on-site supervisors ranged from 100 to 48 points with the top six on-site supervisors’ scores ranging from 100 to 90 points. The top six scorers were included because six participants would allow for
manageability of the data collection and analysis and a score of 90 appeared a natural cutoff. The six participants did indeed allow the researchers to reach a saturation point in the data in which no new perspectives were gained (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, the researchers were willing to invite more participants if saturation was not met after interviewing the six participants.

**Participants**

Participants in the study were six school counselors currently working at middle and secondary schools in a state in the Midwest. To protect the school counselors’ identities, pseudonyms are used. As mentioned above participants were recognized as leaders by the students who were receiving supervision from them as a requirement of a school counseling internship course by being the top six on-site supervisors rated by their interns on the *Leadership Rating Scale*. Three participants, Peter, Lacy, and Kelly, worked in middle schools with the remaining three participants working at the secondary level. All except one of the participants, Natalie, had worked as teacher before entering into school counseling. The years of participant experience as a school counselor ranged from 10 years to more than 20 years. Three participants, Natalie, Lacy, and Kelly, reported being employed in school districts located in rural areas. Two participants, Peter and Denise, reported employment in school districts located in suburban areas. One participant, Michelle, identified employment in an urban school district. Michelle reported working at the only school where the majority of the students were identified as African American and from a middle to lower socio-economic status. The other participants noted that they worked in districts serving primarily Caucasian students from middle and upper-middle socio-economic backgrounds. Three of the
participants, Natalie, Denise, and Lacy, mentioned serving in formal leadership roles as counseling department chairs. Peter shared that he served on the school leadership team which consisted of educators, administrators, and support staff. All of the participants were Caucasian, and there was one male included in the sample. All were licensed school counselors in which renewal involved the acquisition of continuing education units.

It would have been preferential to have more diversity of participants in terms of race, gender, and school demographics. The researchers wonder how school counselors from various cultures (e.g., Hispanic, African American) would have provided a broader understanding of school counseling leadership. Likewise, we wonder how including more men would have impacted our understanding of the experiences of school counselors pertaining to leadership. It was also a perception that school counselors working in differing school districts (i.e., urban, rural, or suburban) might have preferred different types of leadership based on the unique needs of students, for example, needs related to school funding, a community’s economy, and graduation rates.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were used to collect data because Hesse-Biber and Levy (2006) suggested that interviews are used when researchers are focused on a specific topic. In our case that topic was school counseling leadership. They also suggested that in-depth conversations can occur with one interview and can create large amounts of information to be analyzed (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2006). Participants were the top six on-site supervisors rated by their interns on the *Leadership Rating Scale*. Participants were
initially contacted by a researcher (Guillot Miller) through e-mail or, if unresponsive to the e-mail, by phone and asked if they would be willing to participate. Upon acceptance of the invitation, the researcher provided the name to the two researchers that would be responsible for conducting the interview. Each of the six interviews was conducted by at least two of the researchers and lasted approximately one to three hours. Formal consent forms were completed at the interview. One of the researchers served as the primary interviewer while the other researcher(s) observed the process of the interview and provided aid (e.g., asking additional questions to help the participant to expand on his/her comments). Interviews were conducted in private locations usually in the school counselor’s office and were audio-taped. The interviews used a semi-structured (Heppner, Kivlinghan, & Wampold, 2008) format with open-ended questions developed by the researchers. This allowed for consistency between researchers and interviews and allowed the interviewee to “have ample opportunities for offering richer responses” (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 2008, p. 287). Questions included ways they provide leadership in their schools or ways school counselors could provide leadership and the biggest obstacles for school counselors in providing leadership in schools. These questions were used to enable researchers to explore the experiences of those interviewed (Patton, 2002). Follow-up questions permitted interviewees to provide more depth and meanings to their answers. After each interview the audiotape of that interview was transcribed. The researchers analyzed the transcriptions as described below.
Analysis

A content analysis was performed to inductively analyze the data gathered from the participants (Berg, 1998). The researchers read over the transcriptions of each school counselor in order to gain a sense of their experiences and conceptualizations of leadership. Words or statements relevant to participants' conceptualizations of leadership were identified and coded (Patton, 2002). The codes were words that labeled the word or statement in order to help researchers “locate key themes, patterns, ideas, and concepts” (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2006, p. 349). For example, the researchers highlighted and coded common or repeated words used by participants such as “collaboration” or “advocacy”. As another example, the code “leadership practice” was used to code a description of a leadership activity described by the school counselor or the code “collaboration” was used when the interviewed school counselor described leadership in concert with others.

The codes were then analyzed to find patterns, and codes with similarities were combined to form categories. An analysis of codes continued and those codes that did not fit into categories which related to participants' experiences and/or conceptualizations of leadership were removed (Patton, 2002). This process continued until three categories or themes emerged from the data. The common themes identified in participant descriptions in the current study of school counselor leadership included (a) having a shared sense of leadership, (b) leaders being perceived as trustworthy, and (c) leaders being perceived as persistent.

Textual descriptions, including a description of each of the themes and quotations from participants that supported those themes, were written describing
common perceptions and experiences surrounding school counseling leadership. Transcripts and textual descriptions were compared by two researchers (Guillot Miller and Seefeldt) for accuracy and to assist in finding items that required additional clarification.

Although saturation is a concept that has its roots in grounded theory methodology, this concept was utilized in our content analysis of the transcribed interviews to note when data collection was complete. The researchers found that saturation had occurred because in conducting the six interviews it was thought that a point was reached when no new themes were arising and no new insights were gained (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Trustworthiness and Creditability of the Current Study**

Researchers met during the developmental stages of the study and throughout the data collection and analysis phases in order to discuss personal views regarding school counseling leadership. During the data analysis phase of the study, the researchers reflected on their personal experiences and beliefs regarding leadership in school counseling in order to gain clarity of their preconceptions and biases, and then attempted to limit the influence of these biases (e.g., school counselor leaders need to be actively involved in professional organizations, school counselor leaders follow the ASCA National Model). While the total elimination of bias is impossible (Moustakas, 1994), by becoming aware of biases the researchers attempted to investigate the topic without preconceived notions interfering with the analysis (Creswell, 2007; Katz, 1987).

As a form of member-checking, participants were then provided with their own transcripts and the themes and textual descriptions derived from their transcripts and
asked to comment on their accuracy and, where needed, to provide additional comment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants agreed to the accuracy of the themes and no participant provided additional comments. Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe member checking increases the creditability of the research results.

Results

Three major themes evolved as a result of the analysis of participants’ responses to questions posed regarding their experiences and conceptualizations of leadership. Through analysis of the interview transcripts an understanding of participants’ shared experiences and their conceptualizations occurred. What follows is our understanding of that which was shared by the school counselors pertaining to school counseling leadership.

Participants held a shared sense of school leadership in which leadership was viewed as a collaborative activity. Secondly, participants suggested, from experiences, the notion that leaders form relationships based on trust. Lastly, participants believed that leaders were persistent and were perceived as hard-working by colleagues which were characteristics that they thought they displayed. Below is a further description of these themes and, in part, they are described by including examples of the participants’ statements.

Shared Sense of Leadership

Participants experienced and conceptualized school counseling leadership as a shared activity. All six participants described leadership that involved collaboration and consultation with stakeholders such as teachers, parents, administrators, community counselors and counseling agencies, and colleges and universities. The school
counselors interviewed noted that their leadership involved the engagement of others in providing insights into situations in order to best serve students and schools.

The school counselors provided an idea of a shared sense of responsibility with others (e.g., parents, teachers, etc.) when serving students. Participants voiced that leadership meant encouraging others to be involved. Natalie stated that she did not want to “do it all” and that being a leader who was responsible for doing it all was not her desire. Peter mentioned,

Well I think a leader makes a big mistake when they have all the answers because one of the things I remember from a long time ago. My mother taught me this. Those who know it all, do it all. In other words, if you say you know it all then people are going to step back and say “go ahead, go and do it”. But no one perspective works for everybody. Nobody has the answer.

He further stated, “I don’t think anyone on this earth has all the answers, so you need all the heads you can get. And you’re a fool to think you can do it yourself”. Kelly echoed Peter’s sentiments in describing leadership as communicating the message that all parties have some things to offer and, when taking the lead to help students, she asks teachers to inform her of their thoughts and ideas. She described the message leaders should send as one of “We’re all in this together” and that “I don’t know it all”.

In describing this shared sense of leadership the school counselors we interviewed felt that their leadership involved encouraging others in the schools to focus on mental health needs of students. All of our counselors met or thought leaders in school counseling should meet regularly with teachers and administrators in order to advocate for students and for their counseling programs and, while respecting
confidentiality, to provide them with information regarding counseling issues faced by students. Michelle mentioned meeting weekly with her new principal so he “just hears the four of us [counselors] talking and he has an idea about what’s going on.” She thought that by taking the leadership role she was able to better inform the principal of their jobs. She stated, “I want him to know that we do more than that [record-keeping]. So I don’t know what his previous experience has been with counselors, but I definitely want to sit down with him one-on-one and let him know at least what I’d like to do.”

Denise mentioned that school counselors should take a leadership role in meeting with administration. She stated, “If a student is coming to us with problems they may also be in trouble with administration, so it is very important that we share maybe some information that could be helpful to the administrators; information that they may not have [while respecting the confidentiality rights of the student].” She further described situations in which students come to her and she takes the leadership role in collaborating with others to help the student.

For the student that is having a problem that comes down to my office, I have to be able to form some sort of help line for that student. Whether it means that I need to have a parent conference or teacher conference, do I need to include the school psychologist and/or special education teacher? I try to figure out what team is needed and who needs to be involved in that team. And the other important part of that is that I need to have a strong network team with agencies outside of the school. We are school counselors and we need to know when we need to draw the line and we need to refer. So I need to have a strong, strong outside referral and that takes a lot of time.
Peter described his counseling program’s development of activities that teachers can use throughout the day to support character traits that he presented during the morning announcements. Peter suggested that collaboration with teachers is part of the “role of leadership” for a school counselor. He suggested that school counseling leaders should encourage the participation of others by finding places within the school that need attention or improvement and motivating others to join in these efforts. This is a form of leadership which he often performs. He thought that a leader is one who can find someone’s “strength and work that strength for the benefit of the whole thing.” Peter also thought that effective leadership involves working “behind the scenes helping other people accomplish more…so the team forms better.” Denise echoed this notion in stating her belief that “leaders should be good delegators”.

The school counselors interviewed suggested that being a part of initiatives in the school was important in leading. Natalie described taking an active role and “being in places in schools that are moving things forward.” Furthermore she described her approach to counseling now as more global in that it’s a systems approach. She stated, “I am part of a system that impacts our guidance programs and these guidance programs impact teachers’, parents’, and students’ understandings of what we do.” Natalie’s service on committees appears to be consistent with her understanding of leadership which she described as “being actively engaged with the body of people in our school, that is, a committee to examine things, and that I am here to participate and to contribute.”

Natalie described leadership as being “actively engaged in teams” and being a “team player”. Lacy also provided an example of leadership from her practice in which
she was responsible for organizing counselors from her district in order to develop a direction for their work and for facilitating a quarterly meeting of middle school counselors throughout the district in order to share information about working with middle school students. These activities provided illustrations of efforts to establish opportunities for shared leadership.

In describing a shared sense of leadership, Lacy, Peter, and Kelly described leadership as being open to the new ideas from others. They thought that these others often included teachers and administrators. Peter described being open to ideas from unlikely sources, school counseling interns, and he condemned more senior personnel who viewed themselves as leaders and used their age and experience to “have a leverage to have their way.” Instead, he suggested that the young professionals working in schools should have a voice and be listened to, “sometimes the youth have a better angle because you are dealing with young kids, and they respond to those younger teachers a little better and in a different way, so you can’t discount that.”

Trustworthiness

Many of the participants mentioned the importance of school counselors being seen as trustworthy and described relationships built on trust as integral to their school counselor leadership. Participants appeared to believe, in describing their experiences, that this trust was not something established when in a traditional leadership role, but rather building trust with school stakeholders was an on-going process and something they had to earn. It appeared that Kelly supported this in describing how she established herself as a leader in the school,
And if I can build some relationship with the teachers and say, you know, I’m here for you, … just establishing some routines with them first off, such as opening the door with your initial letters that you have going out and saying you know, you’re not out there by yourself.

Kelly added that being seen as a leader begins by “delivering a program in a manner that cements their trust in you and that being organized, being timely [in your response to teachers], and by having good solid ideas that help them [teachers].” Denise thought that leaders should make people feel relaxed and comfortable and not threatened in any way. Lacey described the first step of leadership as being open in relationships so teachers know you are available for them. She stated “the teachers … see a lot and I need their help and they need my help… so they know that they can come to me always and I can go to them always. So, it’s real open.”

Denise added to this idea of trust in suggesting that leadership involves both teachers and administrators feeling that the person is “loyal and supportive”. She noted that confidentiality plays a key role in developing trust as a leader and stated, “if they [teachers] can come down and say, ‘I have a weakness here,’ I’m not going to run down to the principal and that I truly am going to work to give them some options [to handle their situations].” Additionally, Lacy thought that leadership involves respect and that in order to be seen as a leader she must garner respect from administrators and students. She added that “this respect is the result of developing open relationships with them [administrators and students].”

Four of the participants, all of the secondary counselors and Kelly, explained that colleagues would describe them as leaders in their schools in that they could be a
“confidant” to the teachers, administrators, students, and/or parents. They were sought out in times of personal and/or systemic crisis for support. Michelle thought that these positive relationships with teachers were the result of a trust she built because the teachers can “so readily come down and discuss issues about students and personal issues about themselves” and know that she will not share their personal disclosures with others.

In conceptualizing leadership as building trust in relationships the school counselors stressed the importance of being a representative that can openly share the students’ struggles and concerns while honoring their confidentiality. Michelle commented on this aspect of leadership and noted that “the biggest thing is just being here for them [students]. Letting them know that I’m willing to work with them and not judge them is the biggest part.” Denise said that being a leader as a school counselor meant being seen as trustworthy by students. She explained that students need to “know that unless they are going to harm themselves [or others], what you say in here [her office] stays in here.” She thought that in order to remain trustworthy to students she wouldn’t deceive them in terms of the referral sources. She responds to parents by saying “well how can I ask them [students] to trust me when I am coming in here blindsiding them. So I won’t do that, if the parents want me to withhold that they are making the referral then I won’t pursue the issue with the student further.”

**Persistence/Endurance**

The school counselors interviewed included the concepts of persistence and endurance in their experiences and conceptualizations of leadership. It was evident from all of our interviews that these school counselors were leaders and viewed leaders
as people who work hard and who work along side others. We did not get a sense that they conducted or thought of leadership as hierarchical with them serving in the ordinate position (e.g., leaders providing proclamations to be followed or leaders delegating all the work), but they were on the “front lines” working to get the initiatives they espoused accomplished. Leadership in school counseling for participants included involving themselves in activities to improve the school in general and counseling program in particular. The concepts of persistence and endurance were particularly salient when the school counselors shared their experiences and beliefs about school counseling leadership in terms of advocating for students and school counseling programs. Natalie described school counseling leaders as those that were “actively engaged at all times”. In mentioning how colleagues would describe the leadership she provides in her school, she stated “hardworking. I know that they [colleagues] know that I stay there [at school] many, many hours and it is to get the job done.” She further stated, “if they [colleagues] have a new idea or committee that needs to be formed I think they ask me to be a part of it, because they know I will work at it, be supportive, and help to give it some life.”

She also noted that leaders should be engaged in the school in which they work, in the community, and in the counseling profession. She stated,

There is some importance to having a presence in your community, and some key places. So that’s why I am engaged in the community and serving, whether it’s the Lion’s club or the Rotary club, or other service organizations. You get the pulse of the community and the needs of the community, so it’s kind of a two-way street you can receive feedback on your services, but you also get a sense of the community needs that can help to shape your program.
The school counselors interviewed in this study understood that school counseling leaders persisted in getting their voices heard while bringing value to their school counseling programs. Denise described her school counseling leadership as making “sure that people see what we [counselors] do and value its importance”. Lacy echoed these statements in describing leaders as people who develop a mission statement in order to “let people know who we are and why we’re here and what we do.”

Participants shared that school counselors should be resolute in what they feel is right for students. In sharing how others would describe her as a leader Lacy noted that others would describe her as “driven and stubborn”. She went on to describe a leader as one who “won’t give up” particularly if situations are occurring that are not healthy for students or when one must “go up against a lot of other voices”. Michelle felt that school counseling leaders need to be “assertive” in working for the needs of students. She described assertiveness as a characteristic that would describe her leadership. She stated, “catching them [students] in the hallway, pulling them out of class, and talking with them. Not pushing, but definitely letting them know and making sure that they know that they are important to somebody.” There appears to be the concept of persistence in her description of contact with students in that it is a continual effort rather than hoping that things are fixed after one meeting.

Peter mentioned the persistence he exhibits in leading teams that help students, “I want them [students] to come back and tell me if something works. If they tell me it doesn’t work then, we’ll try something different, but we will get it to work and we do, but it takes time.” He added most of the time with the insight of the parent and the student, and everybody else putting their effort together it does work. He stated, “It takes some
time. It doesn’t always work over night.” Kelly thought that school counselors are leaders when they exhibit persistence in advocating for the social and emotional needs of children which sometimes, “gets lost in the shuffle.” She stated that,

I dig my heels and my feet in a little bit more to say we can’t forget about those things [personal and social issues] because we’re dealing with the whole child. We need to make sure that those things [personal and social issues] don’t go away. The things we know as educators that are important.

The school counselors we interviewed shared the notion of persistence and endurance when describing the leadership provided in advocating for school counseling programs. They described leadership as sharing the mission of their work on a daily basis. This seemed to be understood as being visible in the school while carrying out their responsibilities. The majority of participants felt that leaders not only had to have high levels of endurance, but these high levels of endurance needed to be visible to others. Michelle shared this in describing her beliefs,

If we don’t make ourselves known then they [administrators] can say “you know what, we don’t need counselors in this building”. So, I really go about it as I need to make sure that people see what we do and value its importance….the only way that I can see how to do that is to go out and be involved in all kinds of different activities.

Lacy thought that school counseling leaders should be persistent in alleviating non-counseling related tasks from their assigned duties. In describing the persistence and endurance of her leadership Lacy stated, “There are administrators within this school that want us to discipline. I still do lunch duty. I fight it tooth and nail. I have
written formal letters as a leader for us. In those letters I just keep restating, in a
different way, why it’s not okay that I am out there [lunch duty] as a disciplinarian and I
have to invite them [students] right after lunch to talk to me as a counselor”. She then
stated that leaders should be “stubborn”, particularly if “something is not healthy for kids
or if it’s what is not right for kids”.

In the analysis of the transcripts it became apparent those interviewed described
leaders in school counseling as people who worked along-side others in providing
leadership, were viewed as trustworthy by their colleagues, and were persistent and
had endurance in advocating for people and things for which they held strong beliefs. It
also became evident that there was a common thread across all themes that leadership
does not occur in isolation. As the three themes emerged the concept of leadership
occurring with and for people gained stren


gth. While this concept is strongest in the
theme “A shared sense of leadership”, the school counselors interviewed also described
how leaders had to be trusted by the people that they worked with and that they worked
hard and were persistent in things they believed would make teachers’, administrators’
and students’ lives better.

Discussion

The three themes that emerged from the descriptions of the school counselors
strengthen the existing general literature of leadership and literature related to school
counseling leadership. It appears that the interviewed school counselors experience
and believe leadership in school counseling to be similar to what researchers describe
as effective forms of leadership. As mentioned earlier, the results of the current study
may aid school counselors in their reflections on school counseling leadership. It may
be beneficial for them to see the work of identified school counseling leaders and compare their current practices to our descriptions. The descriptions that follow pertaining to our understandings of themes presented by the interviewed school counselors may also provide school counselors with ideas for enhancing their leadership practices.

These findings may also be helpful to beginning school counselors in that by establishing themselves as trust-worthy they may be able to gain the support from stake-holders within the school in order to approach leadership from a collaborative framework. A framework our interviewed school counselors found to be most effective. Additionally, they may be able to gain the sense from our interviewed school counselors that those activities associated with being a leader in a school require persistence and endurance and at times the results they seek may take time to come to fruition.

With regard to the emphasis on a shared sense of leadership, data from this study suggested that school counselor efforts at leadership consider the importance of collaborative relationships where others make valued contributions. Bemak (2000) noted that “Schools must undertake systematic and well-planned cooperation in three areas – collaboration within the school, with the multiple aspects of the community, and with families” (p. 327). Regarding collaboration within the school he commented on working with administrators, teachers, and support personnel like school psychologists; for example, in working with teachers he mentioned, “School counselors can assist teachers in understanding cultural learning styles, develop group process skills and conflict resolution strategies in the classroom, and acquire assessment skills for more serious mental health problems that must be referred to counselors and community
agency personnel” (p. 327). Kouzes and Posner (2002) noted the importance of individuals working with each other to get things done. They thought it was important “to develop cooperative goals and roles, support norms of reciprocity, and reward joint effort” (p. 252), and they mentioned, “When talking about what is planned or what has been accomplished, it’s essential that you talk in terms of our vision, our values, our goals, our plans, our actions, and our achievements” (p. 270).

With regard to trustworthiness, in this study being available was mentioned, building nonthreatening relationships was indicated, and being loyal and supportive was mentioned. Kouzes and Posner (2002) noted, “At the heart of collaboration is trust” (p. 244). Bennis and Nanus (2003) wrote, “The truth is that we trust people who are predictable, whose positions are known and who keep at it; leaders who are trusted make themselves known, make their positions clear” (p. 41). Kouzes and Posner also mentioned that “Being willing to actively seek out, listen to, understand, and use other people’s perspectives builds trust” (p 288). They noted, “Because they’re more trusting of their groups, they’re also more willing to let others exercise influence over group decisions. It’s a reciprocal process. By demonstrating an openness to influence, leaders contribute to building the trust that enables their constituents to be more open to their influence. Trust begets trust” (p. 247). Maxwell (2007) commented on how leaders establish trust, “By consistently exemplifying competence, connection, and character” (p. 63). He went on to mention that “People will forgive occasional mistakes based on ability….And they will give you some time to connect. But they won’t trust someone who has slips in character” (pp. 63-64). He noted that a person’s character is communicated by consistently living one’s values, demonstrating potential through being “honest,
disciplined, and hardworking” (p. 65), and receiving respect from others as a result of “making sound decisions…admitting…mistakes, and by putting what’s best for their followers and the organization ahead of their personal agendas” (p. 66).

With regard to persistence and endurance, it was noted in this study that school counselors might consider staying involved in school related projects and remaining resolute in what they perceive to be helpful for students. Northouse (2004) reviewed research pertaining to the trait approach to leadership and noted that, “Some of the traits that are central to this list include the following: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability” (p. 18). Regarding determination, Northouse commented, “Determination refers to the desire to get a job done and includes characteristics such as initiative, persistence, dominance, and drive….Individuals with determination…have the capacity to persevere in the face of obstacles” (p. 20). Based on an interview, Day, Davis, and Fitchett (2007) noted six “core values” of individuals providing leadership in education (p. 8). One of these values included persistence and it was noted that “Persistence is following through and remaining positive when obstacles or challenges arise. Persistence is willingness to change the plan of action, if needed, so that the goal can be accomplished….Persistence is the ability to get things done” (p. 9).

It would seem that the conversation pertaining to school counselors as leaders in the schools has just begun. Hopefully future research will bring additional perspectives to this role particularly from school counselors from diverse cultures and school districts. It may be beneficial to interview school counselors who work with different age levels (e.g., elementary, middle, and secondary) and explore the differences in leadership
experiences. In addition to interviewing cohorts of school counselors, it could be informative to elicit perspectives on school counselor leadership from other constituents, such as, teachers, administrators, and parents. Further, it might prove valuable to study particular leadership endeavors, e.g., efforts to establish and use advisory groups, efforts to conduct needs assessments, and efforts to implement and use programmatic outcome evaluations. It is assumed that school counseling departments and, as a consequence, the schools themselves are more likely to benefit from the intentional study of leadership by school counselors.

In our attempt to understand the experiences and conceptualizations of school counselors we interviewed six school counselors. These interviews expanded our understandings of school counseling leadership in that the view of leadership as a collaborative endeavor was supported. It may have been a surprise to some readers, as it was to some of us, that the interviewed school counselors assigned such importance to leaders being trustworthy and persistent in establishing and in maintaining their leadership. Through our presentation and discussion of results we hope to have provided school counselors with ideas on which to reflect when considering their own positions on school leadership.
References


