School Counselors' Mental Models: Missing Piece to Role Transformation

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Abstract

Drawing from Senge's Organizational Learning Model, the authors of this phenomenological study explored school counselors' mental models (i.e., assumptions) related to their professional role. To elicit mental models, thirteen school counselors participated in a focus group where they selected and described images that represented their assumptions about the profession. Utilizing thematic analysis, findings were categorized into three themes: 1. Caring and Supportive, 2. Help Students Navigate Experiences, and 3. Be Reactive. Implications for how mental models could be used to address discrepancies between training and professional practice is discussed.

Keywords: school counselors, mental models, system thinking

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2022, 2024) and the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2023a) set the standards that inform the preparation of school counselors. Within the last five years, both organizations offered updated guidance on preparing school counselors to meet the needs of 21st century learners. In 2019, ASCA (2022) developed and published their first set of standards to inform the preparation of school counselors. The standards are a "unified set of principles guiding school counselor preparation programs in training effective future school counselors in areas of professional practice and ethical behavior" (ASCA, 2024, para. 1). These standards cover four key areas: 1. Learner and

Learning, 2. Content, 3. Instructional Practice, and 4. Professional Responsibility (ASCA, 2022). In 2023 CACREP published their revised standards with the "intent to promote a unified professional counselor identity" and "require that graduates demonstrate both knowledge and skill across the curriculum as well as professional dispositions first with respect to universal counselor functions and secondly with respect to their CACREP specialized practice areas" (CACREP, 2023b, para. 3). Despite these detailed standards for counselor educators to utilize when preparing school counselors for their roles, practicing school counselors often perform tasks that are not aligned with their training (Blake, 2020; Lewis et al., 2022).

Within the school counseling literature, authors have explained the reasons for the gap between preparation and practice as principals inappropriately defining the role of the school counselor (Dahir et al., 2019; McConnell et al., 2020), school counselors' apprehension to take on professional advocacy roles (Goodman-Scott et al., 2022; Havilik et al., 2019), and school counselors disagreeing with ASCA on what is an appropriate job responsibility (Unger et al., 2021). While compartmentalizing this issue into discrete and isolated parts can be useful, systems theorist Peter Senge (2006) posits that the compartmentalization of issues often limits our understanding of them. Rather than break up complex issues into discrete parts, he argues that organizations must prioritize systemic thinking to understand how problems sustain themselves within an organization. Specifically, Senge advocated that complex issues are best understood when organizations prioritize these five disciplines: Systemic Thinking, Personal Mastery, Shared Vision, Team Learning, and Mental Models (Senge, 2006).

In this phenomenological study, we draw upon Senge's (2006) Organizational Learning Theory to guide our understanding of the mental models (e.g., assumptions) school counselor participants held about their role. By identifying mental models, we intend to highlight how the

assumptions that school counselors hold about their role could hinder them from bridging the gap between preparation and practice.

Literature Review

Organizational Learning Theory

According to Senge (2006), dysfunctional organizations keep their members in "perpetual fire-fighting mode," constantly responding to urgent situations and problems, thus hindering progress (p. xvii). Reflection and growth are key tools for change and development; unfortunately, leaders and community members in this mode rarely have the time or resources to engage in this task (Senge, 2006). Organizational learning theory posits that those who embrace reflective dialogue and systemic thinking are better able to conceptualize the root cause of their ongoing issues (Senge, 2006). Systems thinking grounds productive learning communities: complex problems cannot be understood in isolated parts and solutions are multidimensional. Organizations that adopt a systemic approach share four disciplines: personal mastery, a shared vision, team learning, and mental models (Senge, 2006).

Personal mastery is the "discipline of personal growth and learning" that ideally guides people's efforts to solve complex issues (Senge, 2006, p. 131). Individuals who embrace personal mastery acknowledge the current realities that challenge their vision and examine the situation with curiosity and optimism (Senge, 2006). Personal mastery is heartfelt: rather than give up the quest, individuals are driven to understand the reality that is holding them in place, generating questions and seeking answers. For example, a school counselor who operates from the discipline of personal mastery is keenly aware that their purpose is to provide counseling services to all youth; they also acknowledge how the established norms within their school may work against this. Rather than stagnate, this school counselor asks questions and creates opportunities through collaborative relationships to ensure that students have access to their counseling services—both preventative and

intervention-focused. Further, this school counselor challenges their own thinking where it might negatively impact change.

While personal mastery is the driving force, a shared vision is the reason for collaboration. According to Senge (2006), a shared vision is the amalgamation of the personal visions held by each member of an organization. It considers: "what is it that WE want to create?" (Senge, 2006, p.192). Through this connection, individuals can see how they might realize their personal vision. In a school context, a shared vision is powerful: it represents what educators want to create collectively that aligns with their personal visions, values, and passion. For school counselors, a shared vision is an opportunity to connect their unique perspective to the values and goals of the educational community.

Team learning - the third discipline - is the development of a team's capacity to function as a unit, which happens when individuals commit to a shared vision by engaging in the thoughtful examination of issues (Senge, 2006). There are two critical dimensions of team learning: the need to reflect about issues, followed by "innovative and coordinated actions" based on those reflections (Senge, 2006, p. 219). Team learning requires active discernment and open dialogue in pursuit of knowledge (Senge, 2006). Through dialogue, new learning is generated as individuals seek answers to their questions. Individuals must be open to the possibility that their own actions are holding them back from the innovations they seek. According to Bui and Baruch (2010), team learning improves performance and generates knowledge sharing: they must examine current practice and test assumptions in order to understand their challenges and generate solutions.

In Senge's model, the fourth discipline is mental models, which are the "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures of images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (Senge, 2006, p. 8). Magzen (2012) described mental models as cognitive road maps: they illuminate the ways an individual within an organization may respond. While mental

models are helpful guides, they are not always accurate—and prove to be detrimental when they limit our ability to see other options. For instance, if we believe the world is unsafe, we will assume that being outside in a strange city at night is dangerous, regardless of the evidence that tells us crime in that city is low. As a result, we stay indoors and limit our opportunity to explore what the city's nightlife has to offer. Refusal to challenge mental models can prove detrimental to the longevity of an organization (Senge, 2006) or a profession.

Senge (2006) argued that good ideas fail, not because they lacked merit, but because they conflicted with deeply ingrained mental models. When left unchecked, mental models can stop organizations from making the necessary changes that keep them viable (Werhane et al., 2011). In the context of school counseling, Havlik et al. (2019) found that school counselors were hesitant to advocate for their position because they believed the principals' opinions of their role were fixed and could not change. Further, they believed that if they attempted to advocate for their roles, they could lose their jobs. In this case, the school counselors' mental models (about the perceived mental models of their supervisors and the consequences of advocating) prevented them from contributing to positive organizational change. While speculative, this example illustrates the connections between our beliefs and our actions (Havlik et al., 2019).

While unchallenged mental models may contribute to failed initiatives, their identification and examination can promote learning and the discovery of new potential actions (Senge, 2006). Blackman et al. (2022) argued that we amend mental models to accommodate new information; therefore, we must examine our relevant mental models if we are to identify opportunities for change. For instance, Watkinson's (2015) exploratory case study highlighted a multi-year leadership professional development series through which elementary school counselors could identify and examine their beliefs about their role in schools. Prior to this experience, participants assumed their role was defined by others (i.e., principals). As part of their professional dialogue, participants

debated the belief that principals defined the role of the school counselor, which ultimately led to new insight over who defined their role: the counselors themselves (Watkinson, 2015). Examination of current beliefs generated new learning.

Preparation and Practice Gap

Researchers have identified a notable gap in school counselor preparation and practice. In 2021, ASCA published the *ASCA Research Report: State of the Profession 2020* to highlight important details related to school counselor demographics, roles and responsibilities, and challenges of practicing in a virtual learning environment. While offering a full report of the results is beyond the scope of this article, the report did provide some insight into how school counselor respondents spent their time on school counselor related tasks. Of the 7,000 members who completed the survey, only 8.1% reported spending time on tasks associated with defining, managing, and assessing. Because these tasks are essential to school counseling program implementation (ASCA, 2019), it would be difficult for school counselors to gain the required support for their work without participating in these activities. Defining your program is a necessary part of aligning with a shared vision.

Lack of administrative support is another issue that impacts school counselors' ability to close this gap. McGahey et al. (2017) noted that principals assigned school counselors administrative tasks (e.g., test coordination, lunch duty, attendance, scheduling) at a higher rate than what ASCA identified as fair share responsibilities. An exploratory study in Kansas examined the perceptions of 568 principals on the role of school counselor and their familiarity with school counseling programs (Lane et al., 2020). Findings were descriptive and indicated that most administrators were unfamiliar with the ASCA National Model (89%), unfamiliar with the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program (76%), and unfamiliar with the Kansas Curricular Standards for School Counseling (65%). When asked to rate the appropriateness of school counseling tasks, there was

high agreement on ASCA-identified activities: individual and small group counseling, advocacy efforts, interpreting student records, classroom instruction, and student planning (Lane et al., 2020). However, most principals saw certain ASCA-identified inappropriate tasks as neutral or appropriate, such as lunch supervision, coordinating school wide IEP study teams, supervision of classrooms or hallways, data entry for new students, and coordination of achievement testing (Lane et al., 2020). Researchers attributed this misalignment to principals being unfamiliar with the ASCA National Model and mixed levels of agreement with the ASCA-identified appropriate/inappropriate tasks for school counselors (Lane et al., 2020).

Researchers have also noted that school counselors are maintaining status quo practices. For instance, Goodman-Scott et al.'s (2022) phenomenological study revealed that elementary school counselors struggled to advocate for themselves and that experienced school counselors were resistant to engaging in behaviors (e.g., use of data) that ASCA identified as being essential to program implementation. Additionally, Unger et al.'s (2021) descriptive study on school counselors' and principals' agreement with ASCA's list of school counseling activities highlighted that not all school counselors agreed with the tasks ASCA has designated as inappropriate. For instance, school counselors at the high school level did not widely agree with ASCA that administrative tasks such as computing grade-point averages, maintaining student records, coordinating testing and school-wide individual education plans, and developing school attendance review teams, were inappropriate. In this study, school counselors legitimized non-counselor tasks when they viewed those tasks as appropriate.

When examining the gap from a systemic perspective, Dollarhide et al.'s (2007) phenomenological study suggests a relationship between school counselor practice and principals' support of the school counseling program. Findings from this study highlighted that when school counselors engaged in services that benefit their students and the community, the principal noticed

its impact—which shaped how they viewed the work. While not intentional, this relationship suggests that school counselors' mental models could influence principals' perceptions of their role in the school.

Purpose of the Study

Recognizing the power that mental models have in organizational change, this descriptive phenomenological study sought to understand the mental models (i.e., assumptions) that practicing school counselors hold about their roles. Mental models are a lens people use that guides their future actions, and when unexamined they can prevent organizations from adopting new and relevant practices (Senge, 2006). As Fillion et al. (2015) reasoned, in order to make shifts in practice, individuals must examine how people, including themselves, support the perpetuation of complex issues that limit growth. For systems change to occur, school counselors must investigate the mental models that interfere with the full implementation of a school counseling program. Not doing so may negatively impact their ability to close the preparation and practice gap, as they will be unknowingly complicit in sustaining their current circumstances. To elicit school counselor participants' mental models, this study is guided by the question: how do school counselors perceive their role?

Methods

We engaged in a descriptive phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the mental models practicing school counselors hold about their professional role. In utilizing a qualitative approach, we assumed that we do not know "the participants' experience"; therefore, we sought "to understand the studied phenomenon in a new light to make invisible aspects of the experience become visible" (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 735).

Procedures

All authors received Institutional Review Board approval from their respective universities before starting the research project. We recruited participants through several school counseling related social media platforms (e.g., Facebook); state school counseling association listservs; the ASCA SCENE platform, a discussion forum for ASCA members; and ASCA's School Counseling Analysis, Leadership, and Evaluation (SCALE) Research Center. Potential participants received a recruitment letter with a link to the consent form and demographic survey. Those who met the inclusion criteria (noted in the participants section below) were contacted via email and given dates and times to register for a focus group. We held four focus groups of 2-4 participants each. In-person focus groups typically include more participants; however, Forrestal et al. (2015) recommended smaller numbers for online synchronous focus groups to make the conversation more manageable. Focus groups were conducted via Zoom, lasted 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. We employed focus groups to allow participants to compare their lived experiences across a shared phenomenon (Breen, 2006). Professional development was provided to participants for participating in the research study.

Participants

School counselors were eligible to participate in the study if they had two or more years of experience working as a school counselor, worked within a public school, and earned a master's degree in school counseling from a CACREP accredited program. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), data saturation for a phenomenological study is reached with three to ten participants. For this study, we reached saturation with our fourth focus group and had 13 individual school counselor participants.

All participants identified as women; 12 (92%) participants identified as straight/heterosexual and one (8%) participant identified as bisexual. Among the participants, nine

(69%) identified as European American/White, two (15%) identified as African American/Black, and two (15%) identified as Middle Eastern. The average age of participants was 42.77 years ($SD = 10.99$, $Mdn = 43$), with an average of 8.85 years ($SD = 5.87$, $Mdn = 6$) of experience as a school counselor. Ten participants worked in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia (DMV) area (77%) and three (23%) were school counselors in the Southeast, South Central, and Pacific Northwest parts of the United States. Participants worked in schools that represented all geographic classifications with six (46%) participants from rural school districts, five (38%) participants from suburban school districts, and one (8%) each from town and urban school districts, respectively. There was strong representation across grade levels with six (46%) elementary school counselors followed by four high school counselors (31%), two middle school counselors (15%), and one school counselor (8%) who worked in an alternative grade level setting (K-7). Five (38%) participants identified their schools as having Title I designation.

Data Sources

Demographic Survey

Prior to participating in the focus group, participants completed a brief demographic survey to confirm their participation eligibility and answer questions related to identity, school context, and their professional experiences with supervision, consultation, and professional development. Examples of eligibility questions include, "Did you graduate from a CACREP-accredited counseling program?" and "In what kind of school do you practice?"

Focus Groups

The first author facilitated the focus groups, while the second and third authors alternated participation, serving as an observer and providing technical support. To identify the mental models school counselors held about their role, metaphors were used. According to Curry and Bickmore (2013), metaphors in educational research allow people to "construct meaning within their work

lives" (p. 16) by attending to what is in the conscious and unconscious mind. Further, Törneke and Hayes (2017) contended that through metaphors people can make an experience better known to themselves and others. To elicit mental models, Moon et al. (2019) noted that images are useful.

We opened the focus group by reminding participants of its purpose (i.e. to understand the lived experiences of school counselors and their understanding of their professional role) and inviting them to select three metaphors (images) that represented the beliefs they held about the role of the school counselor. The group facilitator reminded participants that there were no right or wrong responses and that they should select images that immediately came to mind. Participants searched and identified their own images using a Google search feature located within Nearpod, a digital interactive platform. Once each participants' images were posted to the Nearpod board, the facilitator invited participants to introduce themselves and describe how the three images they selected reflected their beliefs about the role of the school counselor. Following this opening, the first author used a semi-structured focus group protocol to elicit additional insights about the school counselor role. A semi-structured protocol allows for specific questions to be addressed while providing space for participants to expound on their own lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Interview protocol questions were also developed from a review of the literature on professional school counselor identity development and school counselor role. Sample questions on the focus group protocol included: "How do your images represent your perception of your role?" and "After listening to what others had to say, what resonated with you?" Using images and asking questions prompted participants to collectively explore the meanings behind their images to externalize their mental models (Jones et al., 2014).

Data Analysis

Sundler et al. (2019) argued the merits of using thematic analysis when analyzing descriptive phenomenology studies because it takes a descriptive approach to the examination of lived

experiences. Hence, we utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis, a flexible data analysis method that is applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. As Braun and Clarke directed, we began the process of data analysis during the data collection phase. Utilizing memoing, we made note of ideas and patterns within participant stories during the focus groups. To prepare for the formal data analysis process, the transcript function in Zoom transcribed each focus group and the fourth author reviewed each transcript for accuracy. Next, the second author de-identified and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy.

The first and second authors conducted the data analysis process. One researcher identifies as a Black woman who spent 10 years in K-12 education, five of those working as a school counselor, and who currently works as a counselor educator. The other researcher identifies as a White woman who spent 14 years working as a school counselor and who currently works as a school counselor educator. Both have prior experience with qualitative data analysis. Due to our previous experiences, we used our first meeting to question our pre-understanding (Sundler et al., 2019; Tufford & Newman, 2010) prior to reading the data. Next, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and noting initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reviewing the entirety of all four transcripts for context, we selected a subset of data—the metaphor images and descriptions—from each of the transcripts. We analyzed data that focused on participants' images and interpretations, the crux of their mental models (Cömert & Gürol, 2023; Jones et al., 2014). Additional data included information about COVID, which we excluded because it was outside the scope of this article.

The first and second author met four times to inductively develop initial codes from two of the four transcripts. We then independently coded the final two transcripts using these initial codes and wrote memos to use during the consensus coding process. During the consensus coding process, we reviewed and collated our initial codes into more meaningful units based on data in the

remaining two transcripts. We then used tables and mind maps to discern relationships between these codes, noting codes with multiple quotes versus those with single quotes, to create candidate themes and sub-themes. We developed seven codes during this step of the process. Next, we collated these seven codes into three candidate themes. These steps occurred over four additional data analysis sessions, completing phases two and three of the thematic analysis process.

In phase four of the thematic analysis process, the entire data set was re-read, and we organized quotes by themes to ensure there was a coherent pattern within each candidate theme. We determined the prevalence of a theme based on the number of different speakers who articulated it (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and gave prominence to those metaphors and themes that multiple participants and focus groups spoke about. We mapped the themes a final time following an audit. At this point, we verified that all themes were evident in all four focus group transcripts for triangulation purposes. Finally, in phase five of the thematic analysis process, we finalized the name and description for each theme, selecting extracts of data and producing the final report to conclude Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis process.

Trustworthiness

We used several strategies throughout the research process to increase trustworthiness in the results. These strategies included researcher reflexivity, member checking, and auditing both the methodology and the findings. We describe each below.

Researcher Reflexivity

Sundler et al. (2019) stated that reflexivity in thematic analysis is an attitude sustained throughout the research process. We developed this reflexive attitude from the start by questioning our pre-understandings and making those overt through conversations with other team members prior to and throughout the data analysis process. Some of our assumptions included the belief that one's counselor education program directly impacts school counselor identity, and that role

confusion amongst school counselors impacts how they view their professional role. We actively questioned each other throughout the process as we developed and re-developed themes in multiple phases of the thematic analysis process. Engaging in this critical reflection provided greater awareness of our influence on the research process. We maintained these conversations and evolving assumptions as data memos throughout the research process.

Member Checking

We utilized member checking to increase the credibility of the results (Hays & Singh, 2011) and enlisted member checking prior to and after data analysis. Prior to analysis, participants reviewed their focus group transcript to confirm and give feedback on its accuracy. We used these final versions of the transcripts in the data analysis process. Two of the 13 participants requested changes to clarify the information given. After analysis, participants were presented with five themes and a description of each theme through a Google form. Participants were asked to provide a yes or no response to the question, "Does the theme of [theme], as described above, reflect your own beliefs?" These questions required a response. If a participant selected no, the form prompted them to "describe how their beliefs were different" in an open text box. The form did not require them to complete open text responses. Ten of 13 participants completed the theme review form. One hundred percent of these respondents indicated that the theme, as described, reflected their beliefs except for one theme. Two respondents indicated that when describing school counselors as "doing it all" we needed to include additional tasks in the theme's description. We incorporated our participants' feedback and refined the thematic description.

Auditing

A final trustworthiness strategy used in this research study was auditing of the methods and the findings. The third author audited the methods. She identifies as a White woman who worked as a school counselor for five years and currently serves as a school counselor educator. Additionally,

she has prior experience with qualitative data analysis. She participated in project idea development and data collection but not data analysis. The methods audit consisted of reviewing the appropriateness of the methodological approach based on the purpose of the research and to confirm that we completed each step of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis in the research process.

The fourth author served as a Critical Friend (Foulger, 2010) to audit the research findings, providing feedback on the themes and descriptions based on the associated images and quotes. The fourth author identifies as a White woman and was a third-year doctoral candidate conducting her own qualitative dissertation study at the time of this study. She has over a decade of clinical mental health counseling experience but no school counseling experience. She provided administrative project support and reviewed the focus group transcripts for accuracy and de-identification but did not participate in data collection or analysis. Based upon her feedback, we collapsed the themes, resulting in our final three.

Findings

Senge (2006) defined mental models as "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures of images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (p. 8). Findings highlighted the mental models that school counselors used to understand their role. Three major themes emerged; they were: 1. Be Caring and Supportive, 2. Help Students Navigate Experiences, and 3. Be Reactive.

Be Caring and Supportive

School counselors provide care and support to their students. Descriptions of their metaphors highlighted the belief that caring and support of youth is essential to being a school counselor. As a participant stated, "we are the ones that care, we're the ones that are the heart of the school. People look to us for love, validation, and support." Another shared,

> The [image] I shared was the stepping blocks, where folks are helping each other up. And everybody at the top is celebrating together. You know, we're the heart of the campus. We're the morale builders and we must also be the role models to show people how to help without being competitive and to celebrate everybody's success because it makes us all better.

Another school counselor explained,

> Counselors are the heart of the school, trying to make sure that although schools have the academics and business part of school, we're still working with humans and just kind of keeping that humanistic part at the forefront in all our meetings. To model [caring] with teachers and parents.

Focused on caring, one school counselor noted, "we've got to show even the smallest of our kids, or the ones with the least problems, that they still matter, and everybody is a part of the school."

Participants emphasized that caring and support was an essential part of how school counselors connected teachers to students and families. As this participant added,

> We do a lot of connecting and bridging between the student and the school, or the family and the school, or the teachers and the students. We're constantly reaching out our hands to grab other hands to connect and build a better school.

However, caring for and supporting students created tension for one participant when doing what is best for the student meant going against educators in the building. One participant remarked,

> I've noticed that there's so much pressure to NOT conduct assessments for IEPs, or NOT to write IEPs for students because of data purposes. I find myself saying, well this student is two years behind and needs help. So, I find myself toeing the line between, I'm a school staff member and I don't want to upset anybody, but I also want what's best for the student and their family.

Help Students Navigate Experiences

Participants believed school counselors focused on helping students navigate their experiences. As one participant remarked, "So, my first image was the directional sign, we help kids find their direction." Another stated, "The school counselor is helping an individual put the puzzle pieces together to make sense out of an issue." This participant shared,

> Middle school is much about letting the student grow and I'm a big fan of the process, even though sometimes it can get sticky and unpleasant. But I feel like it's

important for middle school kids to experience all the stretching that it takes to develop. I feel like we're kind of bumper cars, we just let them ping around, but we also are there to make sure that they don't fall into the gutter or, you know, go a little too far with something. So, we just let them exist in their middle school world.

Helping students navigate their experiences meant that school counselors attended to systemic inequities by speaking or acting on their students' behalf. As one participant mentioned,

I'm a voice for my students, I'm the one that helps them navigate…whether it's personal, social, emotional type stuff or whether it's academic. Maybe they don't feel comfortable talking to a teacher and so I'm the person that's going to speak for them, set up that meeting and try to facilitate that conversation. I'm their voice.

Another participant added,

I think a big part of my job is advocating for students and families and basically bringing out those parts of the story that might not be seen, kind of what's behind the issues, advocating additional support for kids who might be going through things.

Be Reactive

Participants believed their roles were reactive, and they assumed that they had to immediately respond to the needs of others. As one participant described, "I put out fires all the time. You know, students in conflict or stuff going on at home and you just never know what you're going to walk into for the day because it's as unpredictable as fires." Another stated,

We are the ones that are called in moments of crisis, whether its teachers having a crisis because they're overwhelmed, a parent having a crisis because of what's going on, or the student. People really look to us for that.

To meet the immediate needs of others, school counselors saw themselves as having to go outside of their assumed roles and to have all the answers. As one participant shared, "[the school counselor role] is a catchall for the many other things we do, that aren't necessarily what you think of as the counselor role. We seem to help everywhere." Another mentioned, "they come to us because they think we know everything, and we have all the knowledge, and we know where to find everything. I feel like I am the oracle of all knowledge."

Being reactive was also noted when school counselors described themselves as multitaskers. Multitasking conveys the need to be in constant motion to meet the various demands of their position. This participant shared, "And then the hats. [laughs] I posted all the hats because we're constantly multitasking." Another school counselor stated, "And then I picked the girl with all the hands around the computer and holding different things, cause we're multi-taskers and again it goes with the hats." Another shared, "as school counselors we have a lot of things that we're supposed to be constantly doing." This participant described,

> And then the last one is the person holding up the help sign with all the paper. And that's all the other stuff that we must do. The paperwork, and the SAP meetings, and the parent meetings, and all the other things you do; lessons, the lesson plans, and all the other things that they don't tell you about.

Discussion

In his organizational learning model, Senge (2006) highlighted the importance of systemic thinking to solve complex problems. Mental models, when not examined, can hinder organizational learning. This study elicited mental models as explained through metaphorical images and descriptions of those images. Themes emerged that highlighted the mental models school counselors held about their roles which included the assumptions that their role was to be caring and supportive, focused on helping students navigate their experiences, and be reactive to meet the immediate needs of others.

School counselor training standards are focused on how to implement a comprehensive school counseling program; however, if school counselors' mental models do not support such actions, implementing a comprehensive school counseling program may be less likely to happen. Dollarhide et al. (2007) reasoned that school counselors had influence over how principals viewed their role. School counselors could benefit from understanding how their own assumptions could limit that influence, especially when they hold themselves to outdated practices that do not align with their preparation. While identifying mental models of school counselors is new to the school

counseling literature, we acknowledge that the assumptions held by our participants may appear familiar or obvious to the reader. The significance of our findings calls attention to ingrained assumptions held about the role of the school counselor that are often viewed as absolute truths. Through discussion and active discernment, school counselors can examine assumptions to make room for new learning which can lead to a new set of actions.

Challenging Our Mental Models

School counselor participants assumed their role was to model caring and support. Identifying this assumption as a mental model, school counselors can be curious about whether this assumption limits their ability to narrow the gap between their preparation and practice. In this instance, school counselors challenge what it means to be the one who cares when that assumption hinders transformation. For instance, one of our participants noted the tension she experienced when a resource that would benefit a student conflicted with the views of her team. If the school counselor challenged the need to demonstrate caring as a role requirement, she could gain a different perspective on being caring to advocate for her student.

Participants assumed their role was to help youth navigate their experiences, which aligns to their professional training (CACREP, 2023a). Examining this assumption, school counselors could explore how working with students on an individual basis, as evident in some of the examples participants provided, could limit their work in prevention. Utilizing a preventative focus, school counselors can strengthen protective factors within the school environment to help students navigate experiences outside of individual counseling (Zyromski et al., 2022). Yet, if school counselors only focused on helping individuals, prevention could be overlooked.

Finally, school counselor participants held the assumption that they had to be reactive to address the immediate demands of others, even when outside of their role responsibilities. Being reactive is identified as needing to respond to crisis and completing multiple tasks at one time.

Despite training in the ASCA National Model, which highlights preventative and proactive management of their school counseling program, school counselors engage in defining, managing, and assessing activities less than 10% of the time (ASCA, 2021). While the findings in the ASCA Research Report (2021) suggested that school counselors engage in these tasks to a lesser extent, our study is the first to suggest that school counselors hold a mental model that assumes their role is to "put out fires" and multitask. Through reflection and discernment, school counselors can question the validity of being reactive to make it more likely that they will engage in tasks that facilitate program implementation.

Implications and Future Research

Blackman et al. (2022) argued that mental models are hidden assumptions that individuals hold about how an organization functions and the roles that people play within them. Drawing upon Senge's (2006) organizational learning theory, school counselors can create shifts in their practice by identifying the mental models that limit their opportunity to innovate. Counselor education programs and school counseling organizations are seeking ways to better align new preparation standards adopted by CACREP (2023a) and/or ASCA (2022) to professional role expectations. To align preparation standards to role expectations, counselor educators and school counseling leaders must acknowledge the mental models held by school counselors. Since we are not always consciously aware of our mental models or the impact they have on our behavior and actions (Karp, 2005), recognizing and questioning our mental models is an important approach to change. Counselor educators and school counseling supervisors could engage practicing school counselors and counselors-in-training in discussions that identify and examine their mental models prior to introducing them to preparation standards or practice requirements. If we fail to attend to school counselors' mental models, preparation standards and practice requirements will likely be dismissed as being unrealistic or unrelated to professional practice.

As school counselors take opportunities to examine their mental models, future quantitative research could examine the changes in school counselor roles and ways that school counselors are using their time, like the data collected in the ASCA Research Report (2021). Qualitative studies could explore school counselors' experience of examining their mental models and the subsequent changes in their understanding and enactment of their role. Additionally, future research could explore how exploring and challenging mental models could close the gap between school counselor preparation and professional practice. Finally, researchers could pursue more studies on strategies to facilitate discussion of mental models.

Limitations

While the findings provide counselor educators with insights into the mental models that school counselors hold about their role, we acknowledge that, while our goal was not generalizability, there are some limitations. First, most of our participants were from one area of the country; therefore, there may be some limits to the experiences and ideas shared based on training and role expectations for school counselors in this part of the U.S. Additionally, most of our participants identified as White women. While this demographic breakdown reflects the current state of the school counseling profession, the lack of diversity in the participant pool may limit the study findings. Further, the use of focus groups creates the potential for socially desirable responses from participants. We attempted to mitigate this limitation through the information provided in the consent form and instructions at the beginning of the focus groups, as well as by building rapport with and between participants at the start of each focus group to increase the sense of community amongst participants. Lastly, the timing of data collection was during the COVID-19 pandemic which could impact the metaphors participants selected during the focus groups.

Conclusion

This investigation sought to identify and describe practicing school counselors' mental models related to their professional role in order to explore whether these mental models play a role in the gaps between school counselor training and school counselor practice. School counselors' mental models fell into the categories of caring and supportive, helping students navigate experiences, and being reactive. Future studies should explore the influence examining mental models has on school counselor practice and related student outcomes.

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