



Counseling Scholarship & Practice in Educational Communities

The Official Journal of the Ronald H. Fredrickson Center for
School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation

A Qualitative Investigation of Educator-Counselor's Relational Experiences Promoting Career Retention

Kathryn E. Babb, Capella University, Kathryn.Babb@Capella.edu
Laurie O. Campbell, University of Central Florida
Caitlin Frawley, University of North Texas
Viki P. Kelchner, James Madison University

Abstract

In this general qualitative study, we explored relationships that supported professional school counselors to sustain in the field of school counseling as burnout and attrition are a known phenomenon that has implications for the entire school community. In this study, twenty-one early-career school counselors from the State of Florida were interviewed. Using reflexive thematic analysis, two themes were determined (i.e., relationships with colleagues and relationships with administration). Positive relationships with colleagues and administrators were determined to be a protective factor for job sustainability.

Keywords: educator-counselor identity, professional school counselor, burnout, attrition, retention

There is a mental health crisis among children and adolescents in the United States, with roughly one in every five children being diagnosed with a mental health disorder (Leeb et al., 2024). As children and adolescents spend time outside of their families in schools, professional school counselors (PSCs) are a touchpoint for identifying mental health concerns, making them key contributors to the mental health and well-being of school communities. As leaders in schools, PSCs serve their school communities by providing individual and group counseling, career exploration, and academic support services across the PK-12 landscape (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a). PSCs are called upon during crises to support school communities as they navigate

times of stress. Advocating for student equity, supporting staff, and leading systemic change all fall under the purview of school counselors (Goodman-Scott & Ziomek-Daigle, 2022; Rock et al., 2017). With this important role there is a high rate of burnout which has been attributed to issues such as overwhelming demands, role confusion, and professional identity-related difficulties (Mullen et al., 2021).

A critical factor for supporting the quality of a school counseling program is the relationships formed between the PSC and the greater school community. Lemberger (2010) noted relational factors between school counselors and other school personnel promotes learning and educational quality, while reflecting “the spirit of humanism” (p. 136). While there have been professional arguments suggesting that role ambiguity erases the counselor identity of the PSC, other counseling scholars urge for a nondual conceptualization of these intertwined professional identities (Lee & Lemberger-Truelove, 2024; Levy et al., 2024; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). Hilts and Levy (2025) noted that shifting towards a unified understanding of one’s identity as an educator-counselor may mitigate PSCs’ perceptions of conflicting responsibilities within school communities. Given that role ambiguity and competing demands are associated with burnout among PSCs (Mullen et al., 2018), it is necessary to understand environmental and relational components of school communities that harmonize with PSCs’ abilities to embody the educator-counselor identity.

Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) described the importance of embodiment of the nondual professional identity—when a PSC is consistently and congruently operating from a unified professional identity, they more naturally integrate professional roles and build trusting relationships in the school. Relationships are enhanced through this embodiment because when PSCs are working within a coherent professional sense of self, their roles and responsibilities are more accurately understood to others in the school (Levy et al., 2024; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). When educators and administrators accurately identify the PSC’s coexisting and nonhierarchical roles, there

are greater opportunities for sharing workloads that contribute to the success of the comprehensive school counseling program—which ultimately nurtures the PSC’s personal wellbeing, career satisfaction, and commitment to the school community. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore what factors influence PSCs’ job sustainability and their ability to remain in the field, and how relationships may buffer those factors.

School Counselors’ Role, Retention, and Burnout

Despite the ongoing child and adolescent mental health crisis, school districts across the nation continue to face a critical shortage of school counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2024) established that the recommended student-to-school counselor ratio counselor to student is 250:1. The current national ratio is 376:1 (2023-2024), well above the suggested ratio established in 1965 (ASCA, 2024). With increased ratios, there are increased caseloads for PSCs, resulting in diminished services for the students they are serving (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). Moreover, 17% of students are enrolled in high schools with no PSC (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

The skills held by PSCs play an essential role in the overall success of students, families, and schools throughout the PK-12 landscape. PSCs can influence varying aspects of the school setting, including mental wellness, social emotional skills (Molina et al., 2022), academic success (Lashley & Stickl, 2016), and post-secondary planning (McMahon et al., 2014). Schools that offer consistent access to PSCs report improved student outcomes including academic, personal, and social successes, (e.g., high graduation rates and low disciplinary referrals; Geesa, Kuncie, & Enyeart, 2024; McConnell et al., 2020). Further, PK-12 students at schools with comprehensive school counseling programs often express a positive relationship with teachers and staff, share feelings of preparedness for the future, earn high academic marks, and have a positive view of the school climate (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Strickland et al., 2018).

In rural school settings, attrition and burnout of school counselors can be linked to large caseloads, lack of support, and engaging in other duties as assigned or not assigned (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). To mitigate attrition and promote retention, administrators and others need to understand the role of the counselor and advocate for others to understand the role, reduce caseloads as possible, and provide support and collegial connections through professional development opportunities. When burnout is not addressed in school settings it can lead to attrition (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Limberg et al., 2021).

Attrition is not without human and financial cost in education (Macdonald, 1999; Watlington et al., 2010). Little is known of these costs in school counseling, but lessons from education in general provide guidance. First, the human aspect of attrition may affect students and their academic and social progress (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). As students establish trust with a professional school counselor (a trusted adult), they may be reluctant to engage with a new counselor who does not know them or their needs. Teachers who have developed a working relationship with a PSC may experience a lull in their productivity if a new counselor is hired to replace one who left. Teachers who previously engaged and collaborated with their PSC on mutual goals related to the emotional wellbeing of their students via classroom-level interventions may struggle to reignite efforts when faced with the task of cultivating a new working relationship with a replacement PSC. As districts seek to replace a school counselor, burnout may occur with other remaining school counselors as they absorb the caseload of the person who left.

Burnout is a common area of focus within professional school counseling research and scholarship (Fye et al., 2022; Holman et al., 2019; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen et al., 2023; Niles et al., 2024; Villares et al., 2022). Counselors who endure high levels of burnout report experiencing exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and a lack of personal fulfillment within their professional roles (Cook et al., 2021). More specifically, higher levels of burnout predict lower levels of self-efficacy

among PSCs (Niles et al., 2024). Burnout has been associated with decreased productivity and effectiveness in job responsibilities (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016).

Given the negative impacts of burnout among school counselors and its effects on students, researchers have considered factors contributing to high rates of burnout within school. Kim and Lambie's (2018) systematic review of literature found that school counselors' burnout levels were impacted by organizational factors, such as non-counseling related tasks, supervision, caseload, and student-school counselor ratios. Further, Bardhoshi et al. (2022) found that higher levels of non-counseling tasks (e.g., clerical, administrative) were associated with increased rates of burnout among professional school counselors. Conducting non-related counseling tasks may be a barrier to PSCs effectively meeting the needs of students (Holman et al., 2019).

School Relationships

From a humanistic perspective, relationships are core change mechanisms within professional school counseling (Jayne & Stulmaker, 2018). Relationships are the foundation of the counseling profession, and school counselors must foster growth-promoting relationships with their students, administrators, and entire communities (ASCA, 2019a). School relationships among faculty, staff, and administrators are vital to the work that is done in a school. Functioning as a team requires positive working relationships (Truijen et al., 2013). These relationships can be a positive motivational factor of collective efficacy and collaboration which contributes to the overall school climate (Rock et al., 2017). Likewise, both counselors and administrators share the same goal of student success (Lashley & Stickl, 2016). Goodman-Scott and Ziomek-Daigle (2022) found that successful leadership and implementation of multi-tiered systems of support involves fostering strong relationships with students, families, and school personnel.

The role of collaboration within school counseling is not simply a strategy for service delivery, but a crucial expression of shared humanity within the school setting—when PSCs,

teachers, administrators, and educational stakeholders collectively work toward a shared mission, the outcomes for students and the school community become more attainable and profound. Accurate and congruent embodiment of the educator-counselor identity requires the PSC to cultivate collaborative partnerships with various members of the school community, honoring the unique contributions and roles of teachers and administrators (Hilts & Levy, 2025; Levy & Lemberger, 2021). Henry and Bryan (2021) underscored the role of school counselors in promoting resilience and growth-promoting school partnerships within the educational setting, identifying how this requires the PSC to adopt an *educator-counselor-leader-collaborator* identity. Through adopting such professional identities, the PSC embraces systemic interventions and missions via partnerships that promote shared goals of developing assets-rich schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is to explore relational factors of job sustainability among PSCs. Additionally, we sought to further understand how PSCs experienced their relationships as protective factors for burnout, role ambiguity, and professional fatigue. The qualitative investigation was guided by the following research question: How do PSCs make meaning of the relationships they have with school administrators and colleagues that contribute to their retention as educator-counselors?

Methodology

The design of the present study follows a general qualitative design as we were exploring perceptions of PSCs' relationships and were not bound to a theory or methodological approach. We sought to understand the relationships of professional school counselors within a school community.

Participants

Twenty-one certified school counselors participated in the study. Following the inclusion criteria, all participants: (a) held valid school counseling professional certificates in the State of Florida, (b) completed at least three school years and no more than five school years as professional school counselors, (c) were contracted as professional school counselors at a public or private school during the 2022–2023 school year, and (d) worked as school counselors in the State of Florida during the 2022–2023 school year. The participants were limited to one state as the PSC shared the same requirements for school counselor certification. Likewise, similar policies and procedures eliminate the geographical variances that may occur with a broader recruitment focus. Finally, Florida was chosen due to the increasing mental health needs of the students Florida Department of Children and Families, 2024).

Three participants identified as male (14%), and 18 participants identified as female (86%). The mean age of the 21 participants was 33.5 years old. Fifteen participants stated they were younger than 40 (71%), and six participants were between 40 and 50 years old (29%). The counselors were relatively new in the profession (three to five years). The mean number of professional school counseling experiences was 4.23 years, representing eight different school districts in Florida. Eleven participants worked at the high school level, seven at the elementary school level, and three at the middle school level.

Procedures

Prior to collecting data, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was received. The snowball approach was utilized to recruit participants. The first author contacted former colleagues and asked that a recruitment email be distributed to their PSC contacts. Participants expressed their willingness to participate in the study by completing a Qualtrics questionnaire that was included in the recruitment email. When interest was expressed, eligibility criteria was reviewed,

and those who were eligible were contacted by the first author to schedule an individual phone interview. All participants were interviewed at least once. One additional Zoom conversation was held with five participants as the first author required clarification of some statements. After completing the first interview, all participants received compensation in the form of an electronic \$25 Amazon gift card.

The interview data was collected for a larger grounded theory dissertation to develop the Contributions to School Counseling Career Theory and Retention of School Counselors Career Theory. In the present study, all 21 participants' data were coded. The data was limited to the two questions in the interview protocol relative to retention. Within the resulting Retention of School Counselors Career Theory, professional relationships were identified as a mechanism to avoid burnout and increase career sustainability. The present study includes an examination of the mechanisms (relationships among colleagues and administrators) in the educator-counselor profession to identify the protective factors of these relationships.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed by authors one and four. First, we identified the role of professional school counselors. Next, we began the development of our research protocol, with a focus on developing open-ended questions and prompts. Open-ended responses in interviews allowed for the exploration of the context and interpretation of the responses. The first iteration of the interview protocol included six prompts. Upon completion of the first iteration, we consulted with an academic researcher who is an expert on qualitative methods as a fidelity check. Suggestions were made, primarily focusing on eliminating subtle biases within the questions. We discussed and amended the protocol, which was once again reviewed by our colleague. The final iteration of the interview protocol included nine prompts. For the present study, two prompts (which contributed to the *Deidentified 2 Theory*) were considered: (a) “Have you ever considered leaving the field of

school counseling? If so, why did you decide to stay?” and (b) “Think about the support you have received throughout these first few years of your career. How have they influenced your decision to remain in the profession?” These questions were most relevant to the goal of examining retention in the field of school counseling. The first author served as the interviewer with all of the participants.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was utilized as a flexible approach to identify patterns and themes in a data set (Braun & Clark, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis positions the researcher in an active role in data interpretation. There is no neutrality in the interpretation. Byrne (2021), in his primer of Braun and Clark’s methods, acknowledged that reflexivity is valued over consensus. Reflexive thematic analysis considers the engagement and reflection of the data in the analytic process (Braun & Clark, 2019). The benefit of multiple coders includes collaboration which may bring more clear interpretations of the data. Foundationally, the analysis followed an inductive orientation since a pre-selected theoretical framework was not considered for this study. Further, semantic coding occurred as words and comments were considered at face value. The first author was the primary coder. After checking for accuracy of the artificial intelligence generated transcriptions from the phone interviews, transcriptions were printed. The first author conducted coding by reading through the transcripts and making notes that would contribute to classifying the data into codes. For this analysis, she was joined by the fourth author to discuss the codes and themes and the interpretation of the themes. In doing so, themes relevant to the research question were identified (Byrne, 2021). Despite consensus among authors not being the goal (Braun & Clark, 2019; Bryne, 2021), agreement of themes was achieved.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, researchers bring their own experiences and must address their personal beliefs, agendas, and assumptions to avoid subjectivity in the analysis of the data. In this

study, before conducting the first interview and then later during the duration of the study the interviewer and coder discussed their positionalities in relationship to school counselors.

Throughout the study the coders engaged in reflexivity and fidelity checks. During the meetings, the first author gave preliminary codes and findings and discussed any threats to validity. In keeping with Braun and Clark (2021), bracketing was not conducted but positionalities were consistently considered during the analysis period.

Research Team's Positionality

The research team has written together and conducted qualitative research in the past. The first author is a core faculty member in a Department of Counselor Education. Before working as a counselor educator, she was a professional school counselor at Title 1 schools in Idaho and Florida. The second and third authors functioned as writers in this study and did not analyze the data but provide their positions for clarity. The second author was a former K-12 school administrator, and currently is a faculty member in the Department of Learning Sciences and Educational Research at a large southeastern university. The third author is a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC), a certified Child-Centered Play Therapist, and a counselor educator working within a CACREP-accredited counseling program. The fourth author and coder is a counselor educator and a Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisor, National Board-Certified Counselor, and Certified School Counselor.

Findings

A qualitative study was conducted to ascertain what relationships supported PSCs to sustain in their job as school counselors. The following themes were identified: (a) relationships with administration and (b) relationship with colleagues. The following is a presentation of these findings.

Professional Relationships with Administrators

There were three sub themes identified within the administrator-PSC relationship: (a) encouragement, (b) belongingness through valuing, and (c) advocacy. Within the themes of relationships with administration there was evidence that the encouragement, advocacy, and belongingness created by the administrator contributed to the PSCs' desire to remain in the profession.

Encouragement

One idea expressed by many participants was the central role of relationships with administrators in sustaining their alignment with the school counseling profession. The participants highlighted how encouraging moments with administrators helped them feel supported in their professional roles, and contributed to their capacities to fulfill responsibilities in the educational community. The sentiment was most directly conveyed by Jewels, who described her relationship with administration as the most supportive professional relationships she has established:

I firmly believe that you have to be at the school that you feel comfortable with to do this job, and that comes down to the administration to support you...I really think that has led me to stay because I'm able to go to them. Even if I'm just upset or there's a problem, they either just listen or help me solve it, or also stand up for me or support me in situations. It's a really big deal, professionally.

Jewels' explanations underscored the power of supportive relationships between PSCs and administrators, and identified how administrators can provide reassurance, emotional co-regulation, and advocacy for the integrated role of the PSC within the larger school community.

Hannah expressed feeling supported by her administration almost immediately upon being hired. When Hannah joined the faculty at her current school, she discussed the importance of students having an established safety plan with her administrative team. The idea was exceptionally

well-received, and now, every student at the school completes a safety plan. “[B]efore school starts, at 6th grade orientation, every single kid does a safety plan,” she shared. She continued to explain that the significant support she received from her administration highlighted their understanding of the important role of school counselors. “One of the many benefits is now I know the safe people in the lives of my students,” Hannah said. “I have this information about my students because my admin supported my idea and understood my role.”

Belongingness

Allyson shared an experience that similarly emphasized the role of relationships with administrators relative to belongingness. She described a challenging introduction to the school counseling profession due to her first school principal’s behaviors that communicated a lack of respect for her role within the school: “My principal put all the cumulative files in my office, so I had no space or privacy...the message that sent about the value of my role was not positive.” She experienced the principal’s actions and orientations toward her counseling space as a microaggression and microinvalidation which conveyed a message of disrespect for the role of the PSC. Allyson later encountered a corrective experience when a new school principal was appointed, which led to a positive and affirming shift in the professional community-level climate. The new school principal made an immediate effort to restore her physical workspace, which in-turn restored her sense of professional acceptance and school belongingness: “I finally felt valued and understood.”

Advocacy

Caroline spoke about the power of advocacy from her administrator during an angry parent meeting. “So I had a parent who was angry with me, and didn’t like what I had said, or what I did. And instead of them [administrator] just like backing up the parent, and you know, like, it’s fine, like, I’ll talk to her or whatever. They held a meeting, and they sat in the meeting with me.” The

principal's advocacy extended beyond conducting and being present at a meeting. Caroline described "when the parents started to get angry, they actually told the parents that they either have to calm down and talk respectfully to me, or they're going to have to leave." In this situation, the principal's advocacy supported the educator-counselor in her role as a professional and an authority in the school community.

An experience shared by Brenna underscores that relationships between PSCs and administrators may begin to develop very early. Brenna felt support from the school administrator as early as her first interview. "It was just me and the principal, and even that was super inviting. When they offered me the job, I knew I wanted to work there, and it's been great ever since." She went on to describe her current relationship with the administration as "very hands-on with each other." Calendar sharing, weekly meetings, and equitable division of extra duties are ways that Brenna felt supported by the administration team.

Being empowered to speak up in meetings is a way in which Maria felt valued by her administrators. Maria shared that she is often invited to school leadership meetings, and her voice is well-heard. In the meetings, Maria is encouraged to speak up and challenge administrators to think beyond academics:

I can hear the conversation going more towards focusing on the academic side, and not really thinking about the big picture...what's going on at home, outside of the school day that impacts success...I feel comfortable enough to express all of that and feel listened to and heard.

Participants highlighted instances where they received personal encouragement from administrators. In the wake of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Ashley not only saw an increase in the need to support students, but also with staff. She shared that the counselors took on the role of supporting "...the students, staff, everything. There was so much grief and anxiety on campus."

Noticing the toll being taken on the counselors, the school administrative team requested grief sessions for the PSCs, specifically addressing the burnout many of the counselors were feeling. In doing so, Ashley and her colleagues received the self-care they needed to continue to promote the wellbeing of their school community.

Jewels voiced a positive experience she had with an administrator who provided personal encouragement. She shared a story about a meeting with an irate parent and her administrator. When Jewel's work was called into question by the parent, the administrator stepped in and affirmed the work that Jewels had completed. The support continued after the meeting, when Jewels' administrator followed up with her later in the day to ensure her well being after the tumultuous meeting. "Going the extra step to follow-up with me personally gave me more validation that what I did really helped. It meant a lot."

Emmie described how her relationship with one administrator contributed to her feeling hurt and discouraged within her role in the educational community.

It was a really bad experience for me, I, for whatever reason, she did not like me from day one. I don't know what I did. I mean, I have no idea. She said some really hurtful things to me. Like, throughout that year that I worked with her. It was really hard, honestly, to work with someone like that, you know, she did all my observations, all of that. And you know, it was really hard.

Emmie went on to describe the situation that led her to feel like she wanted to leave school counseling by stating, "I did have those thoughts of, you know, leaving because of her. But, again, it's just, I'm not the type of person that's gonna let someone just, you know, drive me out of a job, I guess, which some people do." Whereas, when she changed schools there was a shift in her mindset to feeling valued, increasing her belongingness and desire to stay in school counseling. "I love my principal, I love we have a new AP and I love her... it does make it easier... it does make you want

to stay when you do have that supportive administration because that can be a huge, huge reason to leave the profession.”

Professional Relationships with Colleagues

There were two sub themes within the colleague educator-counselor relationship theme: (a) collegiality, interdependence, and collaboration, and (b) collective mission. In addition to relationships with administrators, participants emphasized that collegiality, interdependence, and collaboration in relationships with colleagues in the school setting was encouraging.

Collegiality, Interdependence, and Collaboration

Rebecca described how her relationships with school colleagues was a central reason for remaining in the school counseling profession. She acknowledged the partnerships she has cultivated with classroom teachers, noting that she enjoys working alongside others with core educator identities who share her commitment and investment in the well-being and success of the students. Hannah expressed a similar sentiment and described experiences of receiving meaningful support from her school partners and colleagues. While recalling a heartfelt memory of decorating the school for Red Ribbon Week with her fellow school counselors and teachers from the previous school year, Hannah expressed feeling valued and encouraged by the school community, “we did it up, and the students and teachers loved it.” She further elaborated that while the decorations were joyful and engaging for students, the deepest significance of this experience was derived from receiving affirmations and feeling valued by fellow educators: “It may just seem like some silly decorations, but to us, it supported our messages. We felt incredibly supported by our coworkers because they enjoyed the decorations and acknowledged our work.” These experiences of receiving recognition and feeling valued as an important member of the school community reinforced a sense of belonging among colleagues. As such, these relational experiences with colleagues illuminate how embodying the educator-counselor identity promotes trust and fuller integration within the school’s

collective mission. When PSCs are collaborating and embracing efforts consistent with the goals and visions held by the broader educator community within the school, there are greater opportunities for strengthening relationships and sustaining one's passion and dedication to the profession.

Collective Mission

Another aspect of relationships with colleagues that promoted job sustainability and dedication to the educator-counselor role was interdependence and solidarity with colleagues. Helen explained how a sense of solidarity with her school colleagues sustained her energy for the profession: "My colleagues have helped me stay here. We all know we're frustrated, but we're frustrated together, and that helps." Reinforcing her educator-counselor identity, Helen's sense of interdependence with colleagues reshaped frustrating moments into relational resilience and buffered against isolation, role fatigue, and burnout. Similarly, Brenna shared how interdependence with her colleagues sustained her passion for school counseling. She described the collaborative and supportive environment co-created with her school team, and how this community-oriented stance promoted her continued dedication to the profession: "I am very fortunate to have a really great team, a great lead counselor, and a great assistant principal above us. We are a cooperative, collaborative team. It's probably the biggest influence on me staying in the profession." For Brenna, these collegial bonds supported her educator-counselor identity, embedded in a network of shared responsibilities toward the betterment of the educational community. Her investment in the field was supported by these collective efforts and mutual affirmations.

Collaborations with educators also posed meaningful contributions to the sustained dedication to the school counseling profession. Consistent across two school settings within the previous five years, Christina experienced a sense of cohesion and role enthusiasm which maintained her commitment to her role as a PSC: "I've been part of really great teams...even the teachers are part of your team, part of you. They want to help the kids too, so we work together. We are a

support system.” Similarly, Bree emphasized the supportive nature of collaborations with colleagues and how these partnerships helped mitigate feelings of isolation that are common among those who are the sole PSC at their school: “You’re usually alone as an elementary school counselor, so with the social workers, behavior specialists, and administrators, we all figure it out together. We are in the same boat.” She further described these collegial relationships as the pillars of her “school family,” noting, “I can’t imagine not being in a school, I just love working with a team of people and supporting each other, supporting the students.” Bree’s nondual educator and counselor identities allowed her to become more fully embedded within the larger school community, which in turn alleviated the feelings of isolated efforts as the only school counselor at her elementary school. Rather than feeling isolated as the sole school counselor, she felt a sense of reciprocity and collective aspirations within a larger educational community of allied professionals.

Discussion

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, along with the Children’s Hospital Association, has declared a mental health emergency due to the increase of mental health crises among children and adolescents (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2021). Increasing care and prevention programs through school-based programming is a pillar of these organizations’ advocacy. School counselors can offer support for children in mental health crises (Lambie et al., 2019). Yet, attrition and unfilled vacancies of school counselors is of concern. Because the quality and strength of the school workforce directly impacts student outcomes, there is a need for increased understanding of factors that sustain school counselors within their profession. The current study explored the relational experiences connected with the educator-counselor identity which sustained PSCs’ dedication to the profession buffering against burnout. An analysis of the findings indicated that relationships with school stakeholders (i.e., administrators and colleagues) were a pivotal factor contributing to PSCs’ job sustainability.

Relationships with Administration

Specifically, PSCs in this study noted encouragement, advocacy, and valuing contributed to belonging and willingness to be an educator-counselor at their schools. Being respected by the school administration as a professional was seen as a positive towards retention. Conversely, negative relationships with administration led to school transfers and ruminations of leaving the profession which leads to burnout (Mullen et al., 2020). Similarly, relationships between administrators and PSCs were noted as a factor related to PSC burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen et al., 2023) and the promotion of job sustainability (Geesa, Maynard et al., 2024; Holman et al., 2019).

One of the identified responsibilities of school administrators is to champion for PSCs in the school community (Geesa, Maynard et al., 2024; McConnell et al., 2020), as demonstrated through communication and transparency. In this study, the PSCs noted that their principal advocacy made a difference in their desire to stay in their school. Participants provided examples of advocacy efforts initiated by their school principals, and how these efforts provided affirmation for the integral role of the professional school counselor within the greater educational community. Counselors noted that the support of their administration sustained them as an educator-counselor and a valuable member of the school community.

Relationships with Colleagues

Retention in school counseling in this study extended to positive interpersonal relationships with colleagues. Colleagues play a role in job sustainability for PSCs. Throughout the findings, PSCs provided evidence that their colleagues' collegiality, interdependence, and collaboration, made a difference during challenging circumstances. They appreciated being frustrated together during tough times. The stories of laughing together and communicating with each other are supported by Mullen and colleagues' (2023) research on career sustaining behaviors among counselors. The

importance of these interpersonal relationships act as a buffer during tough experiences that may push someone towards leaving the profession. Collaboration is a daily occurrence in school settings.

A common subtheme within the educator-counselor and colleague relationship experiences was related to the collective mission. Participants in this study provided experiences of relational depth with their school colleagues that centered around working toward a shared educational purpose. For example, Rebecca emphasized that her central motivation for remaining in the school counseling profession was rooted in her partnerships with teachers which were cultivated during classroom visits and interventions, and she cherished their connections which were centered around a common educator identity. Participants' reactions to this dimension of colleague relationships is unsurprising, considering the centrality of the shared mission and vision within professional learning communities (Lunenburg, 2010). School counselors, colleagues, and administrators are unified in their shared missions and goals for promoting student success (Lashley & Stickl, 2016).

Implications

School Counselors

Building relationships in the school counseling field warrants a multifaceted approach to encourage and foster relationships. For PSCs looking to develop positive networks and collaborations among their colleagues and administration, these connections can be accomplished through communication and by providing a shared vision (Tygret et al., 2020). Likewise, counselor preparation programs should include instruction and opportunities to establish lasting professional relationships and long-term collaborations (ASCA, 2019b). Counselor preparation programs could build their own face-to-face and virtual networks to support school counselors alumni. For those in rural or isolated areas, an online group or professional organization may serve as surrogate relationships for school counselors to avoid burnout (Fye et al., 2020; Mullen et al., 2018).

School Administrators

The relationship between PSCs and administrators is essential to PSC job sustainability (Geesa, Maynard et al., 2024). Given the overall implications of the current study, there is a need for implementation of practices that improve the relational factors between school counselors and administrators. School administrators can work to facilitate healthy working relationships with school counselors and advocate for the role of the PSCs (Fye et al., 2020). The school counselor and administrator relationship was noted as a factor in school counselor retention. Therefore, administrators and school counselors should actively work to have open communication. School districts can provide supportive environments by ensuring counselors do not feel isolated in their work. Hosting gatherings or facilitating opportunities to intersect with other school counselors provides collaboration and cooperation. The school district and building administration can affirm the professional role of the school counselor through empowering school counselors.

Limitations to the Study and Future Research

The study includes several limitations. Limitations of the study relate to geographical locale and homogeneity of counselors' length of experience. First, all the participants are PSCs in the State of Florida as our initial intent was to consider the local community. Therefore, this limitation should be considered when applying these findings to school counselors in other states. Consequently, a replica study of a larger geographical region or another state is warranted to understand if there are other factors that contributed to PSCs retention. Another limitation was the limited range of service in school counseling for the study participants (three to five years). The constraint of these years was to capture experiences of early-career PSCs. However, future studies could consider looking at others ranges of service to compare the results and to consider longitudinal influences.

While conducting the study, areas of future research emerged. First, when facing dissatisfaction in their jobs, some participants elected to transfer to a different school, rather than leave the profession. Evaluating voluntary and mandatory school transfers could be investigated in

relation to the reduction of burnout and increased sustainability as an educator-counselor. Next, while there is some existing research regarding school counselors and relationships, there is scant research related to the relationship between school counselors and teachers, and school counselors with each other. There is a plethora of qualitative and quantitative studies on PSC burnout (Hamelin et al., 2023; Mullen et al., 2020; Mullen et al., 2021; Mullen et al., 2023; Sylvester-Nwosu et al., 2024) to expand the understanding research regarding the retention and attrition from the school counseling field is recommended. Further, educational leadership and school counseling education programs should examine their core curriculum to highlight the importance of building PSCs and administration relationships in the school community (Geesa Kunce, & Enyeart, 2024).

Conclusion

The findings in this qualitative study underscore the importance of PSCs' relationships with colleagues and administrators, which served as a critical foundation for participants' retention in the profession. Relational qualities and benefits that promoted school counselors' sustained dedication to their educator-counselor roles included collegiality and interdependence, and unification through collective missions for student success. These findings further support that the embodiment of a nondual educator-counselor identity promotes fulfilling connections and relationships, and ultimately, greater dedication towards supporting the entire school community.

Citation:

Babb, K. E., Campbell, L. O., Frawley, C., & Kelchner, V. P. (2025). A qualitative investigation of educator-counselor's relational experiences promoting career retention. *Counseling Scholarship & Practice in Educational Communities*, 1(2), 154 - 181. <https://doi.org/10.7275/cspeg.2914>

References

- American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, & Children's Hospital Association. (2021, October 19). *AAP-AACAP-CHA declaration of a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health*. <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>
- American School Counselor Association. (2019a). *The ASCA National Model: A framework for school counseling programs* (4th ed.). Author.
- American School Counselor Association. (2019b). *ASCA school counselor professional standards & competencies*. Author.
- American School Counselor Association (2024). *Student-to-school-counselor ratio 2023-2024*. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/f2a319d5-db73-4ca1-a515-2ad2c73ec746/Ratios-2023-24-Alpha.pdf>
- Bardhoshi, G., Um, B., Niles, J., Li, H., Han, E., & Brown, M. (2022). Novice school counselors' burnout profiles and professional experience: A mixed-methods study. *Professional School Counseling*, 26(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X221126686>
- Bergin, C., & Bergin, D. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(2), 141–170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-009-9104-0>
- Boulden, R., & Schimmel, C. (2022). Factors that affect school counselor retention in rural settings: An exploratory study. *The Rural Educator*, 43(4), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1334>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive)

thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>

Byrne, D. (2021). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis.

Quality & Quantity, 56, 1391–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>

Cook, R. M., Fye, H. J., Jones, J. L., & Baltrinic, E. R. (2021). Self-reported symptoms of burnout in novice professional counselors: A content analysis. *The Professional Counselor*, 11(1), 31–45.

<https://doi.org/10.15241/rmc.11.1.31>

Florida Department of Children and Families, Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health. (2024, December 1). *Assessment of behavioral health services in Florida: 2024 report*.

[https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2024-](https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2024-11/Assessment%20of%20Behavioral%20Health%20Services%20in%20Florida%202024%20Report.pdf)

[11/Assessment%20of%20Behavioral%20Health%20Services%20in%20Florida%202024%20Report.pdf](https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2024-11/Assessment%20of%20Behavioral%20Health%20Services%20in%20Florida%202024%20Report.pdf)

Fye, H. J., Bergen, S., & Baltrinic, E. R. (2020). Exploring the relationship between school counselors' perceived ASCA National Model implementation, supervision satisfaction, and burnout. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 98(1), 53–62.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12299>

Fye, H. J., Schumacker, R. E., Rainey, J. S., & Guillot Miller, L. (2022). ASCA National Model implementation predicting school counselors' job satisfaction with role stress mediating variables. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 59(3), 111–119.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12181>

Geesa, R. L., Kunce, D. D., & Enyeart, A. N. (2024). Exploring school counselor-principal collaboration, self-efficacy, and school climate: A comprehensive review of literature. *Mid-Western Education Researcher*, 36(1), 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.25035/mwer.36.01.02>

Geesa, R. L., Maynard, R., Kunce, D. D., & Barrow, S. (2024). Exploring school counselors-

- principal-teacher collective efficacy and school counselor leadership in schools. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 8(1), 1–28. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1431111>
- Goodman-Scott, E., Sink, C. A., Cholewa, B. E., & Burgess, M. (2018). An ecological view of school counselor ratios and student academic outcomes: A national investigation. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 96(4), 388–398.
- Goodman-Scott, E. & Ziomek-Daigle, J. (2022). School counselors' leadership experiences in multi-tiered systems of support: Prioritizing relationships and shaping school climate. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 100(3), 266–277. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12426>
- Hamelin, G., Viviers, S., Litalien, D., & Boulet, J. (2023). Bringing light to school counselors' burnout: The role of occupational identity suffering. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 23(3), 741–761. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-022-09534-2>
- Henry, L. M., & Bryan, J. (2021). How the educator–counselor–leader–collaborator creates asset-rich schools: A qualitative study of a school–family–community partnership. *Professional School Counseling*, 24(1b), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211011907>
- Hilts, D., & Levy, I. (2025). The educator–counselor school counseling supervision model. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 103(4), 389–402. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.70002>
- Holman, L. F., Nelson, J., & Watts, R. (2019). Organizational variables contributing to school counselor burnout: An opportunity for leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. *The Professional Counselor*, 9(2), 126–141. <https://doi.org/10.15241/lfh.9.2.126>
- Jayne, K. M. & Stulmaker, H. L. (2018). *Person-centered school counseling*. In. C. Dollarhide and M. Lemberger-Truelove (Eds.), *Theories of school counseling: Delivery for the 21st century*. (pp. 49–74). Oxford Press.
- Kim, N., & Lambie, G. W. (2018). Burnout and implications for professional school counselors. *The Professional Counselor*, 8(3), 277–294. <https://doi.org/10.15241/nk.8.3.277>

Babb et al. (2025)

Lambie, G. W., Stickl Haugen, J., Borland, J. R., & Campbell, L. O. (2019). Who took the “counseling” out of the role of professional school counselors in the United States? *Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation*, 1(3), 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.25774/7kjb-bt85>

Lashley, C. A., & Stickl, J. (2016). Counselors and principals: Collaborating to improve instructional equity. *Journal of Organizational and Educational Leadership*, 2(1), 1–25.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1131520>

Lee, Y.-Y., & Lemberger-Truelove, M. E. (2024). A phenomenological study of federally funded school counselor educators’ non-dual educator-counselor and antiracist school counselor identity. *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*, 62, 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc06laaw>

Leeb, R. T., Danielson, M. L., Claussen, A. H., Robinson, L. R., Lebrun-Harris, L. A., Ghandour, R., Bitsko, R. H., Katz, S. M., Kaminski, J. W., & Brown, J. (2024). Trends in mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders among children and adolescents in the US, 2016–2021. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 21(E96), 1–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd21.240142>

Lemberger, M. E. (2010). Advocating student-within-environment: A humanistic theory for school counseling. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, 49(2), 131–146.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2010.tb00093.x>

Levy, I., Edirmanasinghe, N. A., Ieva, K., & Steen, S. (2024). The pursuit of a combined educator-counselor identity: Gaps and opportunities in school counselor training scholarship. *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*, 6(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc06kzja>

Levy, I. P., & Lemberger-Truelove, M. E. (2021). Educator–counselor: A nondual identity for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 24(1b), 1–7.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X211007630>

Limberg, D., Cook, C. A., Gonzales, S., McCartney, E., & Romagnolo, S. (2021). Examining school

- counselors' wellness and its contribution to their levels of altruism and burnout. *Journal of School Counseling*, 19(24), n24.
- Lunenburg, F. C. (2010). Creating a professional learning community. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 27(4), 1–7.
- Macdonald, D. (1999). Teacher attrition: A review of literature. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 15(8), 835–848. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(99\)00031-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(99)00031-1)
- McConnell, K. R., Geesa, R. L., Mayes, R. D., & Elam, N. P. (2020). Improving school counselor efficacy through principal-counselor collaboration: A comprehensive literature review. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 32(2), 133–155.
<https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol32/iss2/4/>
- McMahon, H. G., Mason, E. C., Daluga-Guenther, N., & Ruiz, A. (2014). An ecological model of professional school counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 92(4), 459-471.
- Molina, C. E., Lemberger-Truelove, M. E., & Zieher, A. K. (2022). School counselor consultation effects on teachers' mindfulness, stress, and relationships. *Professional School Counseling*, 26(1a), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X221086749>
- Mullen, P. R., Backer, A., Chae, N. & Li, H. (2020). School counselors' work-related rumination as a predictor of burnout, turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and work engagement. *Professional School Counseling*, 24(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X20957253>
- Mullen, P. R., Blount, A. J., Lambie, G. W., & Chae, N. (2018). School counselors' perceived stress, burnout, and job satisfaction. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1), 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X18782468>
- Mullen, P. R., Chae, N., Backer, A., & Niles, J. (2021). School counselor burnout, job stress, and job satisfaction by student caseload. *NAESP Bulletin*, 105(1), 25–42.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636521999828>

Babb et al. (2025)

Mullen, P. R., & Gutierrez, D. (2016). Burnout, stress, and direct student services among school counselors. *Professional Counselor*, 6(4), 344–359. <https://doi.org/10.15241/pm.6.4.344>

Mullen, P. R., Niles, J., Hinchey, K. J., Leger, R. & Dorais, S. (2023). An examination of school counselors' career-sustaining behaviors and their relationship to burnout and job satisfaction. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory & Research*, 50(1), 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2023.2180612>

Niles, J. K., Dorais, S., Cashwell, C., Mullen, P. R., & Jensen, S. (2024). School counselors' burnout, hope, and self-efficacy: A sequential regression analysis. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 102(4), 378–389. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12530>

Rock, W. D., Remley, T. P., Range, L. M. (2017). Principal-counselor collaboration and school climate. *NASSP Bulletin*, 10(1), 23–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636517698037>

Strickland, K. S., Watson, J. C., & Gerlach, J. (2018). Comprehensive school counseling programs. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory & Research*, 45(2), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2019.1646082>

Sylvester-Nwosu, P., Martin, M. & Martin, D. (2024). The struggle between self-care and burnout among school counselors. *Journal of Counselor Practice*, 15(1), 91–122. <https://doi.org/10.22229/aws8975028>

Truijen, K. J., Slegers, P. J. C., Meelissen, M. R. M., & Nieuwenhuis, A. F. M. (2013). What makes teacher teams in a vocational education context effective? A qualitative study of managers' view on team working. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 25(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13665621311288485>

Tygret, J., Mendez, S., Arndt, A., Lovato, D., & Scott, M. (2020). The need for collaboration:

Babb et al. (2025)

Experiences and perceptions of preservice principals and school counselors. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 13(4), 1–19.

<https://research.library.kutztown.edu/jcps/vol13/iss4/3>

U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *A first look: Students' access to educational opportunities in U.S. public schools*. <https://ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-educational-opportunities-report.pdf>

Villares, E., Starrett, A., & Limberg, D. (2022). Exploring school counseling during the first wave of COVID-19. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 100(4), 386–398.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12433>

Watlington, E., Shockley, R., Guglielmino, P., & Felsher, R. (2010). The high cost of leaving: An analysis of the cost of teacher turnover. *Journal of Education Finance*, 36(1), 22–37.