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# Understanding The Call of Social Justice Advocacy: A Phenomenological Study of High School Counselors

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UNDERSTANDING THE CALL OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Counselor Education

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2016

Accepted by:

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## **DEDICATION**

First and foremost, this work is dedicated to my Lord, and savior, Jesus Christ --  
When I reflect back on my journey, I realize that you were with me every step of the way.  
For the countless moments I questioned why I was attempting to take on this momentous  
task, and told myself that I shouldn't or couldn't do it, you showed me that I could.

Secondly, in memory of my loving parents, the late Leon and Catherine Spigner --  
Although you were limited in your abilities to provide your girls with a wealth of  
material things, we always received your unconditional love, encouragement, and  
support. You have made me the woman I am today and for that I am eternally grateful.

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To my sisters, Angela and Karen, my brother-in-law, Bobby, and my nephews, Robert and Christian - thank you for your on-going support; listening to me complain, trying to assist me with some of my projects, telling me not to stress, and encouraging me not to give up. I am genuinely blessed to have family members like you.

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study and your willingness to serve on my committee. Each of you provided very beneficial support and feedback and to that I am most appreciative.

## **ABSTRACT**

Advocacy has always been an integral component of effective school counseling (Field & Baker, 2004), however now more than ever, due to a growing diversified society and the specific needs of students who are considered marginalized, school counselors have been identified as key persons to serve as social justice advocates for all students. The identification of school counselors in this phenomenon is an effort to level the educational playing field by ensuring that each student receives just and equitable access to a quality education. Subsequently, to validate the importance of the advocacy role for school counselors and to ensure school counselors' advocacy efficiency, Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes (2007) outlined a social justice advocacy framework for school counselors based on the American Counseling Association (ACA) advocacy competencies. The framework discusses the important of school counselors being social justice change agents, the need of advocacy in schools, and how school counselors should employ the competencies.

However, despite the social justice advocacy calling, not much research has been done on school counselors' perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies or on their perceptions concerning this advocacy role. Thus, this dissertation focuses on the areas of perceived knowledge and perceptions of roles within a high school setting. A qualitative study using the phenomenology methodology was employed. Through this methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted to allow practicing high school counselors the opportunity share their views.

Findings from this study will add to the literature of this phenomenon and will



provide implications to support, guide and encourage all high school counselors in becoming true social justice advocates.

*Keywords: advocacy, school counselors, knowledge, perceptions, competency*

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

Since the inception of their profession, school counselors have assumed various roles and responsibilities, and as Walker (2006) suggested, because “schools continue to shape and be shaped by an educational system challenged by changing demographics and characterized by blatant inequality and failure”, the role of the school counselor must yet again be revolutionized. Due to the result of increasingly diverse populations within school districts throughout the United States, and the expectation that all students achieve regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status and abilities, national organizations such as the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and the American Counseling Association (ACA) have called for school counselors to serve as advocates for social justice within their school environment (Sears, 1999; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Amatea & Clark, 2005; Walker, 2006; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Wilkerson & Eschbach, 2009; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010; Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, & Duffey, 2011). With this call to action, school counselors are expected to act as leaders in providing equal and fair educational access for all students and to narrow the achievement gaps between advantaged and

disadvantaged groups (Education Trust, n.d.). The following sections provide a brief synopsis of the mandates and initiatives as well as the ACA advocacy competencies.

### ***Mandates and Initiatives***

Over the past 20 years, organizations such as the Education Trust's National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP) have worked extensively to define and articulate the evolving role of the school counselor (Sears, 1999; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Wilkerson & Eschbach, 2009; Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer & Duffey, 2011). During these years, various initiatives surfaced with the common theme of acknowledging the need for transformation in the preparation and practice of school counselors. The initiatives' concepts also focused on the principles of social justice in an effort to connect school counseling program development to those of the main purpose of schools' missions in education reform (Sears, 1999; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Wilkerson & Eschbach, 2009; Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer & Duffey, 2011).

In 1996, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest, an organization whose concentration is on the achievement gap, in connection with the Education Trust, implemented the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI). The organization's premise was that students' lack of success was not a result of the students' lack of ability to succeed, but instead, was due to the students not being challenged academically. However, they saw that despite the numerous resources received by the education system, there continued to be an achievement gap. This observation led the organization's focus on the role of the school counselor. Their research findings indicated that "school

counselors are in the best position to assess the school for barriers to academic success for all students” (Sears, 1999, p. 48), but also discovered that despite school counselors’ unique positions, they were not prepared to serve in an advocate or leadership position. Thus, their initiative was designed to encourage counselor educators to change their training and create programs to prepare counselors-in-training to serve as advocates and academic advisors once securing employment as a school counselor. From receiving the appropriate training, it was the initiative’s hope that these counselors would not only demonstrate the belief that all students can succeed, but that they would also have the skills to provide students with the tools necessary to reach high levels of achievement in rigorous and challenging courses (Hayes & Paisley 2002; Martin, 2002).

Martin (2002) elaborated on this initiative by pointing out that as the call for “accountability and increased academic achievement of all students comes at a time of booming technological advances and rapidly changing diversity in the composition of U.S. schools” (p. 148), now is the ideal time to transform the role of school counselors in an effort to “bring the work of school counselors into alignment with the mission of schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 148). Her article provided a critical look at school counseling, indicating the reasons why the focus was on this group. For example, she pointed out that one explanation was that “school counselors are in a critical position to focus on issues, strategies, and interventions that will assist in closing the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their more advantaged peers” (p. 149). Moreover, the article examined the Education Trust’s 1996 national assessment of the state of school counseling. This assessment looked at graduate-level preparation programs as well as the works of practicing K-12 school counselors. According to

Martin, the findings of this assessment were distressful, but it also provided direction for the Education Trust. Based on the information obtained, they were able to gather the best practices from both the higher education institutions and the K-12 school districts. Thus, the final goal was to put:

school counselors squarely in the middle of K-12 education reform as integral players whose express goal is to remove barriers that impede academic success for all students, and to do so in ways that would not exclude poor and minority students (p. 151).

The article concluded with a description of what the changes to pre-service training would mean for educators, school counselors, and the students they serve. Also Martin introduced a new vision for current school counselors and provided a list of suggestions of what school counselors would have to know and be able to do in order to serve as advocates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Paisley and Hayes (2003) also referenced the need for educational programs, policies, and procedures to develop an increased level of sensitivity to ensure that all students receive a high quality education and graduate from high school. They also discussed the Education Trust's TSCI, CACREP and the ASCA standards. They indicated that during the past five to 10 years, the initiatives occurred simultaneously and were all rooted in the principles of social justice with an interest in joining the school counseling program development to those of the schools. CACREP made revisions to its standards for the education of all counselors, but placed special emphasis on the school counseling area. The revisions highlighted necessary skills for school counselors such as program development, implementation and evaluation, counseling and guidance, and



consultation. The language of these amended standards coincided with the skills that were specified in the TSCI (Paisley & Hayes 2003). Likewise, ASCA revisited their previous standards to develop a national model for school counseling programs with a concentration on a comprehensive approach to the foundation, delivery, management, and accountability of school counseling programs to ensure the needs of all students are met (ASCA, 2005). The goal of this model was to create a paradigm shift providing an answer to the question, “How are students different as a result of what school counselors do?” rather than, “What do school counselors do?” (Paisley & Hayes, 2003, p. 201).

### ***ACA Advocacy Competencies***

The ACA advocacy competencies were developed by Lewis, Arnold, House, and Toporek (2002) as another means of ensuring that all counselors were effective in social justice advocacy. According to Ratts et al (2007), the competencies were established in the hope that they “would help counselors recognize how societal oppression negatively impacts human development and would encourage counselors to use both micro level and macro level counseling interventions when working with clients/students” (p. 91). However, the focus of their article was on school counselors and provided a conceptual framework specifically for this population. The framework was created to demonstrate how school counselors could use the ACA advocacy competencies in their day-to-day practice. They also pointed out the importance of advocacy in education and stressed the value of school counselors serving in the role of social change agents. Additionally, examples of how school counselors as well as school counselor educators should implement these advocacy competencies “to promote access and equity for all students”

(Ratts et al 2007, p. 90) were emphasized. These competencies include three levels: *client/student, school/community and public arena* (see Figure 1.1).

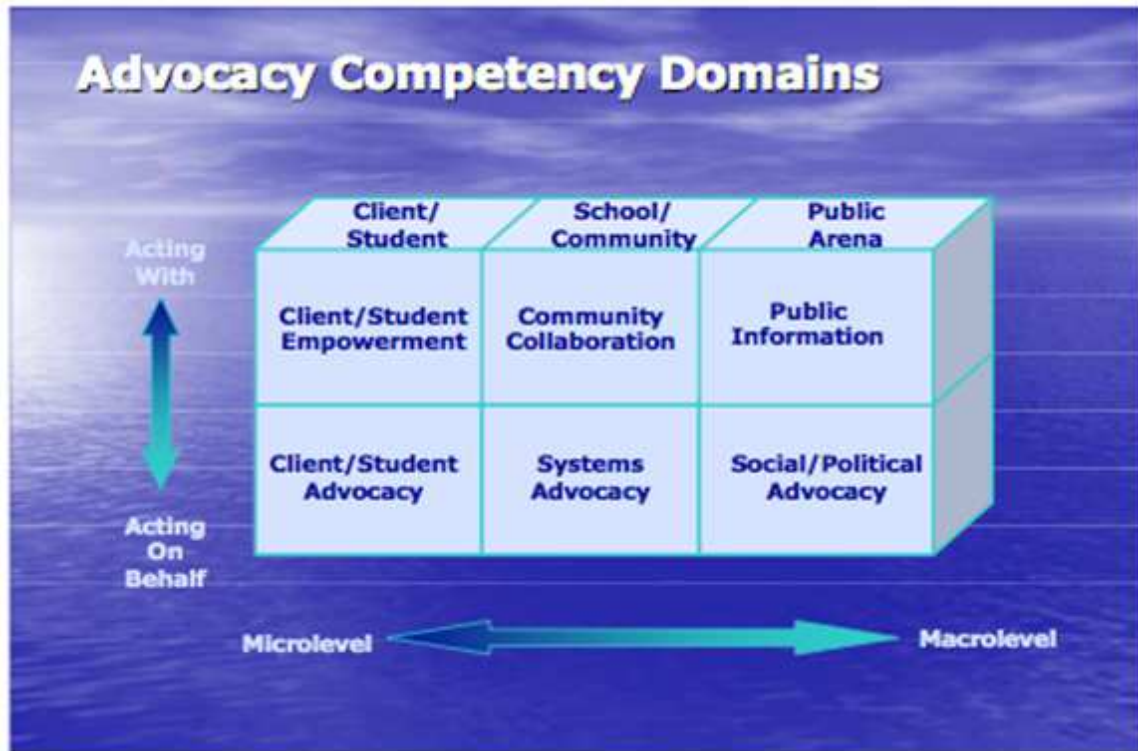


Figure 1.1 Advocacy Competency Domains. Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek (2002). (Source: <http://www.counseling.org/Publications>)

Each level includes two domains which focus on specific content advocacy areas. Under the client/student level, the focus is not only on empowering students to speak up for themselves, but also on advocating on their behalf, if necessary. Examples of this competency area include; a) school counselors conducting classroom lessons on communication skills or facilitating groups on bullying or peer mediation to promote empowerment, and b) school counselors serving as allies or referees in situations in which students are being misjudged by school faculty members. At the school/community level, the goal is for school counselors to create systemic change regarding environmental barriers. Advocating at this level may be done individually or in

collaboration with other stakeholders. Examples include changing the status quo by utilizing data to determine a need, creating programs to address the need, observing students with similar issues such as cutting or eating disorders and bringing about an awareness of these conditions to provide support, and reaching out and providing more appropriate services to disadvantaged groups such as English as second language or special education students who may feel left out of the normal school counseling programs. Lastly, the public arena level encompasses the public information and social/political domains. The purpose of this level is to inform individuals outside of the school about the issues of educational access and inequities. Typical, working at the public arena level stems from school counselors' work at the other levels. For instance, upon hearing a teacher refer to a student living in poverty as a trouble maker, at this level, not only would the school counselor attempt to assist the student advocate for him or herself (client/student level) or conduct an in-service for teachers on generational poverty (school/community level), the school counselor would also invite board members to the in-service or create a mentoring program recruiting board members and other community members to serve as mentors to disadvantaged students. (Ratts et al, 2007).

## **Problem Statement**

### ***Constant Role Changing***

“Over the past 40 years, a major shift has been taking place in how school counseling is conceptualized and practiced” (Gybers & Stanley, 2014, p. 27), and since its conception, it has been in a state of constant change. This variation is because “the profession has sought to respond to—and keep up with—shifting educational philosophies, social movements, economic swings, and federal legislation that have

driven the needs for and expectations of school counselors” (Borders, 2002, p. 181). The various titles of this position have been, but are not limited to: a) vocational guidance - responsible for helping students make the connection from school to work (Lambie & Williamson, 2004), b) guidance counselors - mainly responsible for handling administrative type duties and discussing with students their goals and plans; then offering advice and options (Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2010), and now c) school counselors - with the expectation of serving as social justice advocates and leaders (Erford, 2007). In the latter role, school counselors are expected to help all students in the areas of academic, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2010). The description associated with this most recent title stems from educational reform for accountability and increased academic achievement for all students, and the call to align the work of school counselors with that mission (Martin, 2002).

### ***Conflicting messages from the literature***

Regardless of the mandates and initiatives created to position school counselors as effective social justice advocates, the literature reveals conflicting messages regarding school counselors’ ability to adhere to this expectation. For example, Sears (1999) raised an issue with the Education Trust’s TSCI’s initiative indicating that while the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest fund suggested school counselors should be able to “do more to open the doors to high achievement and successful postsecondary and career options” (p. 47) for all students, school counselors’ actual ability to fulfill this role is minimal due to reasons such as; other non-counselor related tasks school counselors are expected to perform, school counselors’ lack of knowledge and skill, as well as school counselors’ beliefs regarding their true roles. Likewise, other authors expressing the same opinions

as Sears also identified barriers. For instance, Wilkerson and Eschbach (2009) pointed out that school counselors are deficit in a number of skills needed to close the achievement gap. These skills include using data to create programs, instituting program assessments and evaluation, effectively monitoring student progress, as well as promoting school-wide change. While, Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, and Duffey (2011) discovered several barriers to adhering to the call to social justice and advocacy. These barriers include: a) entry-level competencies, b) the school counselor's role, c) school climate, and d) community support and resources.

However, despite the concerns and obstacles noted, other sources indicate great confidence in social justice advocacy as being the ideal role for school counselors. Proponents' statements include: a) school counselors are the ideal personnel to serve as social justice advocates and eliminate barriers to academic success because of their school-wide perspective (Paisley & Hayes, 2003), b) school counselors should be considered a necessary asset to the new inclusive team of closing the achievement gap because of their influence on all members of the school community (Walker, 2006), c) "social justice advocacy is a key task of the 21st century professional school counselor" (Ratts, Dekruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 90), and d) the transformation of school counselors' role to that of advocates is a key element in reducing the achievement gap since academic achievement disparities are linked to racial/cultural and economic issues (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

### ***Rationale for additional research***

Others studying this phenomenon believe that additional research is needed in a range of social justice advocacy areas as they relate to school counseling. Trusty and

Brown (2005) indicated the need for both qualitative and quantitative studies to enhance our knowledge of how school counselors develop advocacy competencies in different environments, to determine levels of competency, and to improve advocacy practice and models. Ratts, DeKruyf, and Chen-Hayes (2007) asserted that more research needs to be conducted on the ACA advocacy competencies to determine how its importance is viewed by counselor educators. Singh, Urbano, Haston, & Mchahon (2010) also stressed the importance of further investigation of advocacy competence in school counselor training, practice, and scholarship. Lastly, Parikh, Post, and Flowers (2011) cited various research needs: a) social advocacy behaviors of school counselors and the factors that influence this behavior, b) actual advocacy behaviors in which school counselors engage, c) values and belief systems of school counselors, and d) effects of such variables like parent involvement or the race, gender, socioeconomic status of students on school counselors' decisions to advocate.

Current research and implications for further research are examples of the importance of this topic of social justice advocacy in schools and the need for school counselors' involvement. If school counselors are the ideal personnel to serve as advocates, it is vital that they have an understanding about their perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their perceptions regarding their role in social justice advocacy to determine if advocacy training efforts need improvement.

Although the literature is replete of articles on school counselors' necessary role in social justice advocacy and on possible reasons for the complex implementation of this transformation, there is very little research available in the school counseling literature explaining their perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and of their

role in working within the complex school system to challenge the oppositions to social justice (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). How do practicing school counselors perceive their knowledge of ACA's advocacy competencies? What are school counselors' perceptions regarding the role of social justice advocacy? As we do not have the answers to such questions, the gaps which exist in the literature concerning these issues need to be filled. Thus, in this study, the research will seek the opinions of high school counselors. By obtaining high school counselors' views of their knowledge of the ACA competencies and their perceived roles in social justice advocacy, dialogue will be stimulated to allow their input into this phenomenon.

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative method will be used to examine school counselors' perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their roles as social justice advocates. The specific research questions are:

1. What are school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies?
2. How do high school counselors perceive their roles relating to social justice advocacy?

This study is relevant because it has been indicated that "school counselors are ideally positioned to create opportunities for all students to define and reach high academic goals" (Education Trust, 2005, para. 2). Despite this expectation of school counselors' ability to effectively serve in this advocacy role, research also recognized that although some of school counselors' responsibilities are relevant, there is a great possibility that a few essential tasks are missing such as improving student achievement

(Sears, 1999). Consequently, several factors which may impede school counselors from being effective advocates have been identified throughout the literature. Some of these factors include: a) lack of counselor pre-service training and professional development, b) additional non-counseling related duties, and c) counselor role ambiguity (Bemak & Chung; 2008, Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Pérusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004; Sears, 1999; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Thus, to obtain in-depth feedback regarding practicing high school counselors' perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role as social advocates, the primary data gathered will be via interviews with school counselors. Chapter Three will discuss more in detail, the methodology of this study, the study design, information about this population and samples, and data collection and analysis.

### **Purpose of the Study**

There is a plethora of literature expressing the importance of school counselors serving as social justice advocates to address diversity and societal inequities in schools (Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011). Research indicates that because school counselor have a school-wide perspective, they are the ideal school personnel to determine barriers that interfere with academic success for all students. Additionally, school counselors have the ability to implement strategies and interventions that will assist in closing this achievement gap (Martin, 2002). However, in spite of the emphasis being place on school counselors in this area, research also presents some challenges such as lack of pre-service training and professional development, additional non-counseling related duties, and poor development of their own advocacy identity resulting in role ambiguity (Evans,



Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, & Duffey, 2011). Limited research has been done on obtaining school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their views of their social justice advocacy role. Thus the voices of actual school counselors in practice are almost nonexistent (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). The purpose of this study is to contribute to the writings through the employment of a qualitative methodology to bring to light school counselors' stance on their perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role of social justice advocacy.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Social constructivism provided the theoretical framework for the study. This paradigm claims "that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective" (Creswell, 2006, p. 545). Likewise, it is identified with the assumptions that people try to understand the world in which they live and work and that they create subjective meanings of their experiences. As a researcher working under these premises, his or her goal would be to look for the intricacy of the participants' views and to trust views as much as possible. The researcher must also provide open-ended questions in an effort to ensure the participants' construction of the situation at hand as well as to allow the researcher the time to listen carefully to the participants. Constructivist researchers also often attend to the possible interactions among individuals' understanding that their truth is related to social and historical means (Creswell, 2003). Additionally constructivist researchers "recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation and they 'position themselves' in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The researcher's intent, then is to

make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8).

## **Operational Definitions**

**American Counseling Association (ACA):** a not-for-profit, professional and educational organization that is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession.

**Academic Equity:** also referred to as equity in education, is a measure of achievement, fairness, and opportunity in education. The study of education equity is often linked with the study of excellence and equity.

**Achievement:** a term defined as something that has been done or accomplished through effort; a result of hard work.

**Achievement Gap:** refers to the observed, persistent disparity of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by socioeconomic status (SES), race/ethnicity and gender.

**Advocacy:** refers to actively standing up for individuals or causes. Additionally, as advocacy relates to the profession of counseling, the ACA advocacy competencies address three levels and six domains in which individuals employ in their line of service. These include: Client/Student Level (client/student employment and client/student advocacy domains), School/Community Level (community collaboration and systems advocacy domains), and Public Arena Level (public information and social/political advocacy domains) (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002).

**American School Counseling Association (ASCA):** supports school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, career and social/emotional development so they

achieve success in school and are prepared to lead fulfilling lives as responsible members of society.

**Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP):**

an accreditation board that accredits masters and doctoral degree programs in counseling and its specialties that are offered by colleges and universities in the United States and throughout the world.

**Diversity:** The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual (<http://gladstone.uoregon.edu>).

**Educational Reform:** the name given to the goal of changing public education.

**Education Trust:** a national non-profit advocacy organization that promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels, particularly for students of color and low-income students.

**Knowledge:** information or awareness gained from study or experience.

**National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC):** Organization created to make certain school counselors across the country are trained and ready to help ALL groups of students reach high academic standards. The formation of this center comes at

a critical time as states, districts, and schools are raising standards and implementing accountability systems.

**Perception:** discernment or judgement.

**Role Ambiguity:** denotes uncertainty about the expectations, behaviors, and consequences associated with a particular role.

**School Counselor:** a counselor and an educator who works in an elementary, middle, and/or high school to provide academic, career, college readiness, and personal/social competencies to all K-12 students through a school counseling program.

**Social Justice:** full and equal participation of all groups in society. Meaning that all people, regardless of race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, abilities and more, should be treated fairly and provided the same opportunities.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

There are several assumptions as well as limitations associated with qualitative research. As for assumptions, according to Heppner and Heppner (2004), “Qualitative researchers believe that objective reality can never be fully understood or discovered and that there exist many possible ways of looking at realities” (p. 138). Moreover, Rubin & Babbie (2014) postulate that “qualitative research is especially appropriate to the study of those topics for which attitudes and behaviors can be best understood within their natural setting” (p. 471).

Reviewing assumptions as they relate to this study, qualitative methodology was determined to be the best approach as the goal is to examine the subjectivity of school counselors’ perceptions of their roles in implementing a social justice agenda. Additional assumptions of this researcher are: a) school counselors’ perceptions of their social

justice advocacy role directly relates to their self-efficacy in fulfilling this role and b) there is a correlation between students' academic, social/personal, and career development and school counselors' social justice advocacy competence.

Limitations of both phenomenological research and qualitative research which may pose concerns for this researcher includes: a) subjectivity of information which may cause difficulty in determining reliability and validity; b) possible researcher-induced bias; c) lack of research skills; d) issues of anonymity and confidentiality; and e) this researcher's presence during interviews which may affect participants' responses (Gay, 1996; Rubin & Babbie, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

In determining the significance of this study, the areas below must be addressed:

#### ***Knowledge Generation***

Within the past two decades, there has been a great undertaking of educational and counseling organizations to include school counselors in the movement of addressing the ever existing educational inequities in U.S. school systems. These organizations have imposed various mandates, competencies, and training initiatives for school counselors in an effort to transform the school counseling role from its traditional reactive stance to wider social justice advocacy focus designed to meet the academic, career, social/personal needs of all students. However, despite the abundance of literature emphasizing this essential role of advocacy, as well as the programs which have been put in place, little has been said about how this role is understood and/or viewed by school counselors. The researcher expects to gain insight into of the perceived knowledge of

school counselors regarding the ACA advocacy competencies as well as their understood roles as advocates for social justice.

### ***Professional Application***

Currently, despite the vast attempts made to include school counselors in the movement of ensuring equity and a high standard of education for all students, school counselors are still faced with challenges that prevent efficiency in this role of advocacy. Likewise, there appears to be little or no discussion as to which areas of school counseling (training, school leadership, self-efficacy, and more.) pose the greatest obstacles. By engaging in this type of research to obtain and understand the knowledge and views of high school counselors, it is this researcher's desire that this study will initiate dialogue among all stakeholders and will ultimately lead to social justice advocacy becoming a common practice for all school counselors.

The researcher hopes that the findings of this study will be beneficial to school counselors, counselor educators, and school leaders/districts alike for various reasons. First, the understandings gained from this study could be used to help counselor educators develop new programs and revise current ones. Second, the findings could increase the understanding of the importance of social justice and how its teachings align with the academic success of all students. Third, it may impel school administrators to understand the importance of school counselors serving in that role. Finally, the finding could provide information to all stakeholders which would encourage them to support and promote the social justice works of national organizations.

For example, if it is discovered that school counselors across the board do not have an awareness of social justice advocacy and its benefits, then all interested parties

will need to join efforts to combat these issues. Such endeavors could include the following: a) counselor educators could create more self-awareness, multicultural and advocacy competency courses as well as infuse these concepts into all courses within their program; b) school counselors could advocate for more professional development focusing on self-awareness, and multicultural and advocacy competence (once school counselors increase their efficacy in these areas, more than likely they would feel more comfortable with communicating the importance of the advocacy role and their needs with their school administrators/district), and c) from the increased awareness of the need for a social justice agenda within school counseling programs, school/administrators and districts could reassign the non-counseling related tasks school counselors are currently expected to perform.

### ***Social Change***

Knowledge acquired from this study may potentially assist counselor educators, school districts, and other stakeholders in obtaining a better understanding of the needs of school counselors in regard to social justice advocacy training. It is the desire of this researcher to obtain commentary from practicing school counselors and to provide them the opportunity to express their beliefs regarding this role. It is hoped that the data retrieved from this research will shed light on possible factors which facilitate or hinder school counselors' abilities to serve in an advocacy role effectively. School counselors who truly understand the social justice concept and who feel competent in this area will exhibit an increased level of self-efficacy. This increased level of self-efficacy will produce more school counselors who are committed to honorably serving in their role of social justice advocate. As a result, school counselors could finally answer the call of

ensuring that students do indeed receive a just and quality education regardless of race, gender, abilities, and income, and are equipped with the tools necessary to be college and/or career ready upon graduation.

### **Transition Statement**

Chapter one provided an overview of this study which examined the social justice advocacy mandates and initiatives for school counselors, the ACA advocacy competencies, the evolution of school counselors' roles, conflicting messages from the literature, and the rationale for more research in this area. The chapter showcased various literature indicating the dire need for social justice advocacy in education and the importance of school counselors' participation in this movement. Despite national counseling and educational organizations' appeal for school counselors to implement social justice practices in their work and to serve as advocates for all students, limited research has been conducted on their perceptions and knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies or their social justice advocacy role. Chapter one explained that this research will entail qualitative-phenomenological research methodology to allow practicing school counselors' voices to be heard.

In Chapter two, a review of the literature will focus on providing evidence of the review of relevant previous professional literature that defines social justice advocacy and speaks to school counselors' knowledge and perceived roles in other counseling areas. Chapter three delivers the "how" of this study, examining the description of methodology, the study design, the sample and instrumentation, as well as, data collection and analysis. Chapter four includes a detailed analysis of the results; and lastly,



a reflection of finding and an explanation of the significance and implications of this study are discussed in chapter five.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Literature Review Overview**

It is well documented that school counselors are expected to serve as social justice advocates for all students (Sears, 1999; Martin, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Amatea & Clark, 2005; Walker, 2006; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Wilkerson & Eschbach, 2009; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010; Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, & Duffey, 2011), however, the literature regarding school counselors' perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and of this advocacy role to effectively serve in this capacity is limited. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the literature as it relates to social justice advocacy (as social justice advocacy is a loosely defined term, this review of the literature begins with studies focusing on its definition), and school counselors' knowledge and perceptions regarding some of their additional roles. The wealth of literature contained in this chapter is peer reviewed and was retrieved from the databases; Education, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The subject areas researched were education and counseling. The keys words used to generate the search results were: school counselors; school leaders; perceptions; knowledge; social justice; and advocacy. This chapter concludes with a summary of the key points of this literature review.

## **Definition of Social Justice and Advocacy**

As national educational and counseling organizations call for school counselors to serve as social justice advocates, understanding the concepts of social justice and advocacy is crucial if school counselors are to carry out this role efficiently. The literature provides a vast array of definitions for social justice as well as advocacy. This section highlights a few broad definitions of both terms, as well as, indicate how these terms relate to school counseling. According to Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007), social justice is considered both a process and a goal. Bell (2007) further explained:

The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure (p.1).

Moreover, Jun (2010) asserted that “social justice evolves around providing equality and justice for all people regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, age, language, religion, and region” (p. 324). As social justice relates to education, Walker (2006) pointed out that school systems should include in their agenda the implementation of ethical decision making at all levels and that there should be an infusion of multicultural trainings as a means of transforming schools’ culture, policies, and practices to produce equitable and caring learning environments.

Kiselica and Robinson (2001) described advocacy as counselors going beyond the traditional method of providing only direct services to clients to also offer indirect services which includes involving outside organizations which influences individual lives. Field and Baker (2004) definition focused on school counselors and defined

advocacy “as an approach to school counseling in which the counselor goes beyond the traditional verbal “give and take,” based on theoretical premises and techniques (p. 57)”. They also deemed that school counselors should go beyond the four walls of their office to obtain resources and interventions that will allow them to advocate for not only individual students, but also student groups and student issues. Moreover, advocacy is considered the manner in which social justice is attained. It involves taking the principles of social justice and putting them into action (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). These definitions of advocacy provide a common theme in that “advocacy involves identifying unmet needs and taking actions to change the circumstances that contribute to the problem or inequity” (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 259).

### **Perceived Knowledge of Various Counseling Areas**

As previously mentioned, the role of a school counselor is very diverse. In addition to various non-counseling related activities assigned by administration in any given school, according to ASCA (2005), a major role for school counselors is to assist with the academic, career, and social/personal development of all students. As this can be a very overwhelming and daunting task, one could wonder if school counselors have the necessary knowledge base to perform their task efficiently. This section highlights several articles surveying the knowledge base of school counselors in various other counselor related areas.

In regards to the social/personal development of students, Price, Desmond, & Price (1990) conducted a quantitative study which explored school counselors’ knowledge of adolescent eating disorders, specifically anorexia and bulimia. The purpose of the study was to answer several questions: How do school counselors discover which

students have eating disorders? What action do the counselors then take? How competent do school counselors feel in assisting students with eating disorders? What do school counselors know about anorexia and bulimia nervosa? Does school counselors' knowledge of eating disorders vary by age, sex, number of years as a counselor, or level or formal education? Where have school counselors received most of their information on eating disorder?

Participants for this study were randomly drawn from the membership of the American Association of School Counselors and consisted of counselors from all grade levels and both male and female from varying levels of education, years of experience, and ages. The number of participants selected were 500, however a total of 337 participants returned their completed questionnaires. The questionnaire was developed by the authors and focused on five demographic variables: age, gender, level of education, number of years as a counselor, and grade level of the students with who the counselor worked. The instrument also consisted of five attitude questions, 16 questions concerning the signs and symptoms of eating disorders, 16 general knowledge questions, and one question about sources of information.

Interestingly, the overall results of this study indicated that although the majority (little over 70%) of school counselors surveyed were knowledgeable regarding the signs and symptoms of eating disorders and had encountered students experiencing this condition, the majority (89%) believed that they were either moderately competent or not very competent in helping students. Additionally, 75% of the respondents felt it was not their role to handle issues of eating disorders and instead referred the student(s) to either parents, eating disorder programs, psychiatrists, or other physicians.

Another article addressing the social/personal arena was conducted by Roberts-Dobie and Donatelle (2007). This study was also quantitative and focused on school counselors' knowledge as it relates to student self-injuries. The participants were randomly selected from ASCA's membership roster and out of the 1000 questionnaires sent out, 518 were returned, but 443 were deemed usable. The participant's pool consisted of both male and female (majority) from all grade levels with varying educational levels, years of experience, educational setting, and the number of students in which they served.

The instrument employed was a 42-item questionnaire developed based on the authors' review of the literature. The items consisted of questions regarding personal demographics, school setting, knowledge of self-injury, confidence in working with self-injurers, and experiences working with students who self-injure. The overall results revealed that the majority (81%) of the school counselors surveyed reported working with students who self-injure. Additionally school counselors agreed that they are the appropriate school individuals to work with self-injurers, but believed more training is needed in the areas of identification and referral.

In their article entitled, *Why Guidance Counseling Needs to Change*, Johnson, Rochkind, and Ott (2010) discussed the results of recently conducted surveys of young adults, age 22-30 who had some postsecondary experience regarding the services they received from their high school counselors. The article is interesting and relevant to this current study as the focus is on the role of school counselors assisting with the academic and career development of all students. As many states and school districts are requiring high school counselors to meet face-to-face with their students to discuss postsecondary

planning, fortunately the surveys' results revealed that 97% of the participants indicated that they had such a meeting with their counselor. Unfortunately, of that percentage, over half indicated that their school counselors were not very helpful in their college and career planning. The surveys posed the question: How would you rate your high school counselors in the following areas?

1. helping to decide what school is right for you
2. helping you find ways to pay for college, like financial aid or scholarship programs
3. helping you think about different kinds of careers you might want to pursue
4. explaining and helping with the application process

The results indicated that 67% of the participants believed that their counselor did a poor or fair job in helping them determine the right school for them, 59% gave their counselors a poor or fair rating on providing assistance in ways to pay for college, 62% of the participants rated their counselor as poor or fair in helping them figure out different types of careers to choose, and 54% believed that their counselor did a poor or fair job in explaining and helping them with the application process.

All of the articles reviewed in this section are of relevance to this study as they identify the importance of knowledge as a focus in various other areas of school counseling professional services.

### **Perceptions of Various Roles and Tasks**

Since its onset during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the profession of school counseling has been ever-evolving. In the first part of the 1900s, the duties of the vocational guidance worker entailed providing vocational guidance, conducting and interpreting

assessments, and determining academic placements. By the midpoint of the century, individuals such as Clifford Beers, Sigmund Freud, and John Dewey brought about an awareness of mental health. Thus, providing personal and social counseling and attending to individuals' holistic development was incorporated. In the latter part of the 1900s, areas such as special education, consultation, coordination, and accountability were added to the already long list of school counselors' responsibilities (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Studer, 2005). Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to "the changes occurring in the United States' demographics and the growing awareness of the need to make substantial changes in the public school system to address the injustices and inequities that underlie the academic achievement gap", (Bemak & Chung, 2008), the role of the school counselor is once again being revisited. According to Gysbers and Stanley (2014), "a major shift has been taking place in how school counseling is conceptualized and practiced" (p. 23). This shift entails moving from a school counseling position to a school counseling program. Within this shift, it is the expectation that counselors will be able to serve as leaders while creating comprehensive school counseling programs and social justice advocacy agendas. As a result of the vast and ongoing changes, many school counselors may have conflicting views about their purpose and struggle with role ambiguity (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). This section provides a review of the literature that offers empirical research as well as philosophical information regarding school counselors' perceptions on several of these various roles in which they are assigned.

A qualitative study was conducted by Ford and Nelson (2007) regarding high school counselors' perceptions of their leadership role. The purpose of the study was to examine how these school counselors viewed their role as leaders in their current school



setting (Ford & Nelson, 2007). The researchers' goal was to obtain knowledge of the effects that school counselors' expected leadership skills may have had on other staff members in the school setting. The study was established on the notion that there is a correlation between effective leadership and counseling and "the relationship between the leaders and those they are leading" (Ford & Nelson, 2007, p. 5). It was based on the New Focus Counselor training initiated by The Education Trust and DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund designed to prepare school counselors to serve as leaders and advocates. The theoretical framework of this study was grounded from the leadership theory and its methodology was the phenomenological approach. The researchers used a stratified sample of secondary school counselors whose names were retrieved from a previous online survey focusing on the perceptions of counselor leadership. From the online surveys completed, four females and one male were identified. Data was then derived from open-ended telephone interviews with these participants. The participants were asked a series of questions about their years of experience, their job description, and their leadership skills. The responses of the study were broken down into three categories; a) counselors' job descriptions and the role of educational leadership, b) counselors' perceptions of their role as educational leader, and c) counselors' knowledge of the transforming role of the school counselor.

The researchers of this study identified two limitations. One being that since the Education Trust Transforming School Counseling Initiative was relatively new at the time of their writing, enough time was not provided to share the initiative's findings with practicing school counselors. The other limitation was the setting of their study. They did not interview or observe school counselors in their natural setting, but believe if they had

done so, they would have obtained deeper meanings from the participants' responses. Despite these limitations, the authors believe that based on their findings, "there may be a gap in counselor educators' knowledge and expertise between the traditional school counselor role and the transformed role that is called for in the current standards of the Education Trust Initiative for the transformation of school counseling" (Ford & Nelson, 2007, p. 19). The overall results of this study revealed that four out of the five school counselors perceived themselves as leaders, however, their definitions of leadership fitted within the traditional mode of school counseling and not with that of the new vision for school counselors. Although this research focused on leadership perceptions, the findings appear to be very applicable to this study in that leadership is a component of creating a social justice agenda.

In the fall of 2008, Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) conducted a quantitative study examining the discrepancies between the actual and preferred practice of school counselors. The purpose was to take a look at several variables such as school level of employment, years of experience, students per caseload, time spent on non-related counseling activities, professional development and identity, and school support to determine if those variables related to discrepancies between how counselors spend their time versus how they prefer to spend their time. Moreover, the researchers wanted to see if the activities school counselors preferred doing aligned with the comprehensive, developmental school counseling framework. This study was based on the insinuation "that what school counselors are actually doing in schools may not adequately address the needs of the students they intend to serve" (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Six hundred school counselors from all three school levels (elementary, middle, and high)

were originally selected from two southern states with three hundred (100 per school level) being randomly selected. A total of 361 surveys were returned and scored.

Participants were asked to complete three different instruments; a) the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (SCARS), b) the Counselor Self-Efficacy Scale (CSS), and c) the School Climate Scale (SCS).

The researchers of this study listed several limitations which include: a) the sample, which is only comprised of two states; b) possible effects of including all the participants in the statistical analysis; c) all information being obtained based on self-report; d) only one instrument, the SCARS, was used to measure time spent on school counseling activities; and e) causation was not attributed to the specific variables since descriptive and correlational research designs were used. Findings from the study indicated that school counselors consistently reported that they would prefer to be engaged in interventions which were associated “with positive student outcomes and wanted to spend less time in non-guidance-related activities” (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008, p. 455). The researchers also believed that these results back up the claim for the need of comprehensive and developmental school counseling programs (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Although this was a quantitative study, the results are applicable to this research in that the components which make up a comprehensive counseling program align with the advocacy competencies necessary to create a social justice agenda.

Bemak and Chung (2008) published an article which focused on the concept of Nice Counselor Syndrome (NCS). According to the authors, transforming the role of school counselors as advocates is a vital element in the reduction of the achievement gap. They believe it is a necessity for school counselors to be culturally competent

practitioners, social justice advocates, and organizational/social change agents, but view NCS as a major barrier to the implementation of a social justice advocacy agenda. The article examines the negative effects of NCS and provides recommendations to help school counselors recover from this condition. The NCS is defined as school counselors who are “comfortable assuming the roles of mediator and problem solver when working with students, parents, and other school personnel” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 374). They are viewed as being “nice” and they are comfortable with that image because they prefer to be known as individuals who are advocates for harmony, acceptance, and peace who avoid and deflect conflict within the school. Because of their strong convictions of the need to be nice, they “shy away from initiating multicultural/social justice advocacy services that may be viewed as controversial, conflictual, or challenging by other persons in the school community” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 374).

In the article, the authors explored characteristics which are exhibited by counselors manifesting NCS. They also discuss personal and professional obstacles which may hinder school counselors from moving beyond NCS. They asked school counselors to consider five questions. Three that are relevant to this study are: a) “What am I doing to address multicultural/social justice issues at my school in general?”, b) “What am I doing to address those systematic factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the academic achievement gap in particular?”, and c) “What sort of professional and personal risks am I willing to take to address these issues in the future? How school counselors respond to the questions helps determine if they are functioning from a NCS viewpoint. The article concluded with 16 recommendations based on multicultural/social justice work in schools and on the ACA advocacy competencies. These recommendations

are designed to assist school counselors in either avoiding or moving beyond NCS. The review of this article is relevant because it addresses possible barriers to counselors creating a social justice advocacy agenda and challenges them to take “risks to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to access high-quality education and are treated fairly in the educational system” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 380).

### **Summary**

This review provides a definition of social justice advocacy and a synopsis of various aspects of the world of school counseling. The information gathered from this review was used to provide direction for the proposed study. Despite all the literature that encompasses school counseling advocacy mandates and school counselors’ roles along with the many barriers they have faced since the beginning of this profession, there is a noticeable void. This void is “the actual voices of school counselors” in relation to their perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role as social justice advocate. Thus, this proposed study will entail face-to-face interviews with high school counselors to obtain their thoughts of this phenomenon.

### **Transition Statement**

Chapter one provided an overview of this study which will examine high school counselors’ perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their roles in social justice advocacy. The chapter showcased literature on the mandates and initiatives, the ACA advocacy competencies, the evolution of school counselors’ roles, conflicting messages from the literature and the rationale for more research in this area. Despite national counseling and educational organizations’ appeal for school counselors to implement social justice practices in their work and to serve as advocates for all

students, limited research has been conducted on practicing school counselors' perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their social justice advocacy role. Chapter one explained that this research will entail qualitative-phenomenological research methodology to allow practicing school counselors' voices to be heard.

In Chapter two, a review of the literature was conducted on various aspects of school counseling. The purpose of this review was to obtain evidence from relevant previous professional literature to create direction for this study. Chapter three delivers the "how" of this study, examining the description of methodology, the study design, the sample and instrumentation as well as data collection and analysis. Chapter four includes a detailed analysis of the results. Lastly, a reflection of findings and an explanation of the significance and implications for future research in the areas of high school counselors and social justice advocacy will be discussed in chapter five.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to explain how the researcher obtained and showcased the commentary of practicing high school counselors as it relates to perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies as well as their role as social justice advocates. In doing so, the researcher discusses the methodology, the research design, the role of the researcher, the context of the study, measures for ethical protection of the participants, criteria for the selection of participants, and the data collection and analysis process. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies?
2. How do high school counselors perceive their roles relating to social justice advocacy?

Despite the mandates and initiatives concerning the great need for school counselors to take on the role of social justice advocacy, there is limited research on school counselors' perceptions of their knowledge regarding the ACA advocacy competencies or their role of social justice advocacy. Thus, in a genuine effort to hear the voices of practicing high school counselors regarding these areas, a qualitative research methodology was employed (Heppner & Heppner, 2004) for this study. According to

Gay (1996), qualitative research deals with investigating variables in their natural setting. The author also indicated that:

Qualitative researchers are not just concerned with describing the ways things are, but also with gaining insights into the “big picture.” They seek answers to questions related to how things got to be the way they are, how people involved *feel* about the way things are, what they *believe*, what *meanings* they attach to various activities, and so forth (p. 209).

As this study attempted to gain insight into school counselors’ perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role in social justice advocacy, qualitative research seemed most fitting in understanding this phenomenon. Furthermore, since the researcher is a current school counselor, the opportunity to interview, converse with and make sense of the participants’ views in their natural setting was available (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The researcher also believes that qualitative research is best suited to answer the questions posed in this study because qualitative research approaches are designed to “tap the deeper meanings of particular human experiences and are intended to generate qualitative data: theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers” (Rubin & Babbie, 2014, p. 471). Additionally, as qualitative research is “especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations” (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 1), its utilization in this study is ideal in obtaining the views and opinions of practicing high school counselors as regards advocacy and social justice.



## Research Design

### *Qualitative vs. Quantitative*

Qualitative research design is defined as “the collection of extensive narrative data on many variables over an extended period of time, in a naturalistic setting, in order to gain insights not possible using other types of research” (Gay, 1996, p. 623). There are several characteristics that distinguish qualitative research from quantitative. These include but are not limited to: a) its general framework which seeks to explore phenomena versus confirming hypotheses about the phenomena, b) its analytical objectives which describe variations rather than quantify variations, c) its question format which is open-ended instead of closed-ended, d) its data format which is textual rather than numeral, e) and its flexibility rather than rigidity in study design (Mack et al., 2005). The major differences that are most important to this researcher are flexibility derived from qualitative research and the possible relationships formed between the researcher and the participants. Flexibility surfaces as a result of the types of questioning. Unlike the closed-ended questions that are typically generated from quantitative surveys and questionnaires which participants are asked the same questions and in an unchanged order, qualitative researchers ask mainly open-ended questions. This form of questioning is more flexible because it “gives the participant the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4). Moreover, because the data collection from qualitative research is typically face to face, the relationship between the researcher and participants is often informal. This unofficial type of approach often allows the participant to feel comfortable in providing more

elaborate and in-depth responses, and permits a more natural interaction between the researcher and his or her participants. (Mack et al., 2005).

### ***Qualitative Approaches***

Creswell (2006) described five types of qualitative paradigms: a) narrative research-an approach which studies “one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences” (p. 54), b) phenomenology-a focus on explaining the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals rather than a single individual to obtain an understanding of those individuals experiencing the same or common experiences of a phenomenon, c) grounded theory-looks at the meaning of an experience for several individuals; however, it not only provides a description, but its purpose is to also generate a theory, d) ethnography-similar to grounded theory in that this research also “develops a theory from examining many individuals who share in the same process, action or interaction” (p. 68), however the difference lies in the location and size of the participants, and lastly e) case study design-“an idiographic examination of a single individual, family, group, organization, community or society. Its chief purpose is description, although attempts of explanation are also acceptable” (Rubin & Babbie, 2014, p. 478). Although all of these approaches have commonalities in terms of the research process (i.e., the research problem, the data collection and analysis, and the research report), for the most part, their differences lie in what they hope to accomplish. Creswell (2006) explains:

A narrative about an individual’s life forms a narrative research. A description of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon becomes a phenomenology. A

theory, often portrayed in a visual model, emerges in grounded theory and a holistic view of how a culture-sharing group works results in an ethnography. An in-depth study of a bounded system or a case (or several cases) becomes a case study (p. 77).

Consequently, since it was this researcher's intent to gain an understanding of high school counselors' experiences of the social justice advocacy phenomenon, phenomenological research seemed most appropriate for this study. Although, other methods such as grounded theory and narrative research also seek to gain understanding of the human experience of a phenomenon (Hays & Woods, 2011), this researcher is not interested in saturating data to develop a theory (a characteristic of grounded theory), nor using a chronological order of events (a characteristic of narrative research).

### ***Phenomenological Research***

Phenomenology was first employed to social science by the German philosopher, Edmund H. Husserl (1913/1954) as a philosophical tradition for the purpose of studying individuals' descriptions of experiences through their senses. Husserl believed that human beings could "only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (Patton, 2015, p. 116). He also hypothesized that understanding derives from a sensory experience of the phenomena. However, to truly comprehend the experience, it must be described, explicated, and interpreted. Thus, phenomenologists' concentration is on how people are able to make sense of the phenomena they experience which will in turn result in them developing their worldview. Even more, Patton (2015) postulated that:

There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means. The subjective experience incorporates the objective thing and becomes a person's reality, thus the focus on meaning making as the essence of human experience (p. 116).

Hence, "the sole purpose of phenomenology is to describe the depth and meaning of participants' lived experiences" and it is the phenomenological researcher's task to "understand the phenomenon through the eyes of those who have direct, immediate experience with it" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291). In an effort to obtain this in-depth construction of knowledge, this research will follow Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology which encourages the researcher to set aside his or her own experiences to focus on the experiences of the participants (Hays & Woods, 2011; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher is an African-American female who is currently a school counselor with 16 years of experience in this field. It is the expectation of this researcher that due to her work related commonalities with the participants, obtaining the data will not be a challenging task; plus the participants will possess a level of comfort and ease in answering the interview questions. By the same token, however, there is some concern that this acquaintance may be a drawback in that the high school counselors may not want to share their true feelings for fear of how it will be interpreted.

As a seasoned school counselor, this researcher came into this study with preconceived values, beliefs, and perspectives about school counselors and the concept of social justice advocacy (Buckley, 2010). A bias held by this researcher is that a vast majority of school counselors are unaware of the call for them to serve as social justice

advocates, and for those who do, there is reluctance on their part due to their lack of understanding of this role (i.e., the responsibilities and activities it involves), a lack of competency to carry out the role efficiently, and/or their own rigid beliefs about groups of individuals. Thus, while obtaining information concerning this role clarification, the researcher took various measures to repel her bias in the data collection and analysis process. Such procedures included; a) keeping a journal to write down possible subjective thoughts and feelings, b) conducting member checks which allowed the participants to review their words and provide feedback, c) participating in debriefings with my committee members, and d) utilizing two coders who are familiar with phenomenological methodology. Each member of the coding team was responsible for conducting their own analysis first before joining forces to develop emergent themes.

### **Interview Questions**

The interview procedure concentrated on obtaining information regarding high school counselors' perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies as well as their role of being a social justice advocate. The interview questions were semi-structured and framed to be open-ended. In following the principles of Moustakas (1994), participants were asked general questions regarding their experiences of the phenomenon as well as about the contexts or situations which influenced their experiences in order to obtain data leading to a textual as well as structural description of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, as his teachings also indicated that other open-ended questions can be asked, the below inquiries were probed:

1. Describe your current school counseling program.
2. What is your role and responsibility in this program?

3. What is social justice to you?
4. What is advocacy to you?
5. Where do your definitions of social justice and advocacy stem from?
6. What types of social justice-related issues do you see in your school?
7. What types of students do you identify as marginalized in your school?
8. What are you doing to help your marginalized students?
9. How do you explain your current stance as a social justice advocate?
10. How prepared do you feel to serve as a social justice advocate in your school?
11. What helps or would help you to be a successful social justice advocate in your school?
12. What recommendations would you suggest to help training programs adequately prepare school counselors-in-training to serve as social justice advocates in their prospective schools? What suggestions do you have for professional development for practicing school counselors?
13. Please take a moment to discuss any other information that you would like to add related to your experiences with social justice advocacy as a school counselor.

These interview questions were adapted from the article, "School counselors' strategies for social justice change: A grounded theory of what works in the real world" (Singh et al, 2010). For their study, the authors conducted interviews with practicing counselors who were self-identified as social justice advocates. The questions they used were developed based on a literature review conducted by the researchers, a pilot study, as well as their research team discussions. The "interview questions focused on the experiences of school counselors in enacting change, as well as on the strategies they

used as advocates” (Singh et al, 2010, p. 137). Although their study concentrated on school counselors who already believed they engage in social justice advocacy, this researcher trusts that their interview protocol is relevant and appropriate in answering the questions for this study.

Furthermore, prior to the interview questions being asked, each participant was asked to complete a brief paper form demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire consists of the following questions:

1. What is your gender?            a) Female        b) Male        c) Transgender
2. Which of the following best identifies your race?
  - a) Caucasian                    b) African American        c) Asian/Pacific Islander
  - d) Hispanic/Latin            d) Native American        e) Other
3. What is your level of education?
  - a) Masters                    b) Education Specialist        c) Doctorate
4. How many years have you been a school counselor?
5. What is the total number of students in your school?
6. What is the ethnic make-up of your school?
  - a) Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_                    b) African American \_\_\_\_\_
  - c) Asian/Pacific Islander \_\_\_\_\_        d) Hispanic/Latino \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) Native American \_\_\_\_\_            e) Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is the socioeconomic make-up of your school?
  - a) Free/Reduced Lunch \_\_\_\_\_        b) Full pay \_\_\_\_\_
8. What type of school setting do you work in?
  - a) Rural                    b) Suburban                    c) Urban

These questions were determined based on the demographic descriptions utilized in the literature reviewed for this study and were adapted from Parikh et al., (2011) and Ford and Nelson (2007).

Consequently in considering the appropriateness of these questions for the current study, this researcher examined the six types of questions outlined by Patton (2015).

These included experience and behavior questions, opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions. For the purpose of this study, all six were used:

1. experience and behavior questions - used to address the current as well as past activities of participants in relation to their responsibilities as school counselors
2. opinion and value questions - sought to draw conclusions regarding participants perceptions about their experiences and roles
3. feeling questions - allowed an opportunity for the researcher to tap into the participants' affective side regarding their advocacy competencies
4. knowledge questions - employed to determine participants' perceptions of their level of knowledge about the advocacy competencies. This type of question is very important in determining possible training needs
5. sensory questions - provided the participants an opportunity to share what they see or hear regarding social justice issues in their school
6. background/demographic questions - its purpose assisted in pinpointing where the participants are in relation to others and to find out how they perceive their own backgrounds as well as to let the readers get an idea of the individuals participating in the study as well as the setting in which they are employed.



## **Procedures**

This study's purpose is to provide an explanation regarding the views of high school counselors on social justice advocacy. Although it is highly noted in the literature that social justice advocacy should be a key role for all school counselors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is limited research on how school counselors interpret this role and if they feel that they are capable in serving in this capacity. This researcher selected high school counselors from the tri-county area of a southeastern state in which she is employed as participants for this study. As the researcher is a current high school counselor, she and the participants will have similar experiences, feelings, and understandings. Thus, this researcher's method for establishing a positive working relationship was honest and forthcoming from the start of this journey of inquiry.

Prior to gaining access to these high school counselors, the researcher obtained approval from the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received permission from each of the school districts in which the researcher conducted this study. The results of this study will expand on the literature by incorporating an important component of school counselors' voices and may provide the researched school districts (and others within the southeastern region and beyond), tools needed to prepare school counselors for this role of advocacy.

## **Ethical Protection of Participants**

“Whenever we conduct research on people, the well-being of research participants must be our top priority” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 8). According to the Belmont Report (1979) as cited by Mack et al., (2005) there are three main research ethical principles:

1. *Respect for persons* requires a commitment to ensuring the autonomy of research participants and where autonomy may be diminished, to protect people from exploitation of their vulnerability. The dignity of all research participants must be respected. Adherence to this principle ensures that people will not be used simply as a means to achieve research objectives.
2. *Beneficence* requires a commitment to minimizing the risks associated with research, including psychological and social risks, and maximizing the benefits that are accrued by research participants. Researchers must articulate specific ways this will be achieved.
3. *Justice* requires a commitment to ensuring a fair distribution of the risks and benefits resulting from research. Those who take on the burdens of research participation should share in the benefits of the knowledge gained. Or, to put it another way, the people who are expected to benefit from the knowledge should be the ones who are asked to participate (p.9).

In choosing to apply the qualitative methodology to this study, the researcher realizes it is her responsibility to adhere to these principles and address any ethical issues that may arise from the direct contact she will have with her participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Measures that were taken included obtaining approval for this research from the IRB at the University of South Carolina and from the districts in which the study was conducted. Additionally, a consent letter was attached to the initial email sent to potential volunteers and an informed consent was given to the participants at the beginning of the interview. Both documents included the following information:

1. the purpose of the research

2. what is expected of a research participant, including the amount of time likely to be required for participation
3. expected risks and benefits, including psychological and social
4. the fact that participation is voluntary and that one can withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions
5. how confidentiality will be protected
6. the name and contact information of the local lead investigator to be contacted for questions or problems related to the research
7. the name and contact information of an appropriate person to contact with questions about one's rights as a research participant (Mack et al., 2005, p. 10)

Moreover, several precautions were put in place to respect the rights of each participant as well as ensure confidentiality. These safeguards included: a) protecting the anonymity of participants by removing or masking identifying information from every form of the data collection such as audiotapes and paper notes; b) destroying all instruments used to collect the data by means of shredding paper documents, erasing tapes, and deleting electronic files; and c) avoiding plagiarism by properly citing resources as well as accurately reporting her findings, both significant and insignificant results (Creswell, 2006).

### **Participants' Selection**

This researcher sought participants who were currently practicing high school counselors in the tri-county area of a southeastern state in which she is employed. As this researcher was seeking to obtain the voices of high school counselors who may have experience with the phenomenon in question, these participants were theoretically

(purposefully) selected based on the potential contribution to the development of this research (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). Additionally, this form of sampling was used to establish the selection conditions for the target participants. Thus the criteria for this study's population consisted of high school counselors currently employed in a diverse school setting -- a) representing all educational levels (i.e. special education and general education), b) comprising of at least three different ethnicities, and c) having at least ¼ of their students on free and reduced lunch. The criteria of diversity was used in determining participants because according to the National Education Association (n.d.), "full acceptance of diversity is a major principle of social justice" (para. 1). Moreover, the specified items within this criteria were identified as they are factors in the challenges educators face with regards to diversity and in ensuring social justice for all students. These challenges include, but are not limited to; a) the academic achievement gaps between students of diverse backgrounds; b) educating students with disabilities; c) staggering disparities in educational resources based on class or income; and d) access to education for immigrants (National Education Association, n.d.)

In regards to sample size, Wertz (2005) posited that the researcher must consider the nature of the research issues, as well as, the possible outcome of the findings, thus it is difficult to determine the number of participants beforehand. Giorgi, as cited by Englander (2012) suggested that at least three participants should be considered if employing the phenomenological method. While Polkinghorne as cited by Creswell (2006), recommended five to 25 participants. Additionally, this researcher reviewed numerous phenomenological studies on school counselors in which the participants ranged from six to 16. For this study, 138 high school counselors were contacted via

email regarding their participation. Out of this number, eight responded regarding their interest. Thus as the literature indicates eight as a sufficient sample size for phenomenological studies, those eight participants were used for this study.

Upon receiving approval from the University of South Carolina's IRB, the request to conduct research within the tri-county area of interest was submitted to each school district office. This researcher received approval from one district two weeks after to request was submitted, from another, approximately five weeks, and from the third district, approval was received after seven weeks. The selection process of the participants began immediately after receiving approval from each of the district offices. In two of the three districts, an email was sent to the district's school counseling coordinator requesting the names and email addresses of all high school counselors in the district. In the third district, there is not a district level school counseling coordinator, so this researcher reached out to the high school counseling directors at each school to obtain the same information. Each individual responded promptly and as a result, a list of the 138 high school counselors in these districts was provided by the school districts and schools for this research.

A description of each school district as well as each school is presented in tables 3.1 and 3.2. This information showcases similarities and differences and offers a context for the schools and districts in which these high school counselors are employed.

Table 3.1 School Districts' Profile – information received for District websites and the 2015 State Report Card

Significant Points	District Information		
Districts (1- 3)	1	2	3
<b>Vision</b>	To challenge and empower our students to be successful in a highly competitive world.	_____ desires to be recognized as a “World Class” school district, expecting each student to achieve at his/her optimum level in all areas.	Every child will graduate from _____ with the critical skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college and the 21st Century global workforce.
<b>Number and Types of Schools/Programs:</b>			
<i>Elementary</i>	21	15	47
<i>Middle</i>	12	6	12
<i>High</i>	6	3	12
<i>Middle School/Early College Program</i>	1	1	
<i>Magnet/Partial Magnet</i>		1	15
<i>Charter</i>			10
<i>Single Gender</i>			2
<i>Alternative Program</i>	1	1	1
<i>Adult Education</i>	2	1	4
<b>Student Enrollment (#)</b>	32,569	25,117	46,916
<b>Students receiving public assistance; homeless, foster, or migrant students (%)</b>	65.0	54.6	57.8
<b>Students with Disabilities (%)</b>	12.0	9.9	7.7
<b>Students served by gifted and talented programs (%)</b>	12.4	18.1	21.8
<b>Students successful in AP (Advanced Placement or IB (International Baccalaureate) programs (%)</b>	48.4	62.0	69.9
<b>Overall state rating of district (2014)</b>			
<i>Absolute</i>	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
<i>Growth</i>	Good	Good	Good

Table 3.2 Schools' Profile -- Participants are identified as counselors 1-8. The numbers were arbitrarily assigned.

Survey Items	School Information							
Counselors (1-8)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>School Enrollment (#)</b>	2239	1673	657	1053	2169	2239	2169	1652
<b>Ethnic Make- Up (%)</b>								
Caucasian	67	58	3	61	41	67	41	60
African-American	26	26	93	24	46	26	46	25
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	2	0.2	3	4	3	4	10
Hispanic/Latino	3	8	4	7	8	3	8	5
Native American	2	0	0	0.4	0.4	2	0.4	0
Other	2	7	1	4	0	2	0	0
<b>Socioeconomic Status (%)</b>								
Free/Reduced		48	64	40	39	30	39	87
Full Pay	70	52	36	60	61	70	61	13
<b>Geographic setting</b>								
Rural (R)								
Suburban (S)	S	S	U	S	S	S	S	S
Urban (U)								

At the outset of this research, email invitations were sent to all high school counselors in the first district that responded, providing an attached consent letter and requesting a reply of interest to participate if they met the criteria. Approximately two weeks after not receiving a response from anyone in that district, another email was sent. From that request, two out of the 32 high school counselors replied agreeing to participate. Additional correspondence was made with those two counselors providing them with the demographic sheet to complete, reviewing the study's requirements, and scheduling an appointment time. Next, research approval was received from another school district. From that district, four out of the 25 high school counselors agreed to participate within in a two weeks' timeframe. Once obtaining their desire to volunteer, the same procedure conducted with the first participants was done. Lastly, 81 emails were sent out to high school counselors in the third district after receiving their approval to conduct research, and from those school counselors, two responded within

thirty minutes of the email being sent out. Interestingly, this researcher did not receive any other replies from anymore counselors in any of the districts. From the eight school counselors that volunteered however, the two from the first district were from different schools, the four from the second district came from different schools (two from each one), and the two from the last district also came from two different schools. Of these eight participants, three were African American, one African American/Asian (Korean), and four were Caucasian, additionally they were all female. One of the participants had 12 years of experience, six had between one and 10 years, and one only had .5 years of experience. See Table 3.3 for a breakdown of the participants' demographics.

*Table 3.3 Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Demographic Information</b>	<b>Participants</b>
<b>Race</b>	
African American	3
African American/Asian	1
Caucasian	4
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	8
Male	0
Transgender	0
<b>Level of Education</b>	
Masters	4
Masters +30	1
Education Specialists	2
Doctorate	1
<b>Number of years as a school counselor</b>	
.50	1
1-10	6
12	1



## **Data Collection**

“Interviews have a unique purpose, namely, to acquire data not obtainable in any other way” (Gay, 1996, p. 223)

This researcher’s main source of data collection was done via semi-structured interviews utilizing an interview guide with open-ended questions. According to Buckley (2010), conducting interviews with participants is the richest type of data collection in that it allows the researcher to obtain a variety of perspectives from the individuals directly involved in the phenomenon being studied. He suggested that in this form of data collection, the participants are able to provide insight and direct descriptions into possible unseen but vital issues. Thus, the questions in the interview focused on school counselors’ current programs, roles, and responsibilities, their perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their perceptions of social justice advocacy. As it is this researcher’s objective to obtain an understanding of school counselors’ perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and how they view their role in social justice advocacy, the questions were designed to allow for deep probing from the interviewer as well as to provide an appropriate level of freedom which permitted a conversational style of interviewing. The interview sessions were recorded per prior written consent from the participants, and was transcribed by the researcher for the purpose of the data analysis. The interview times ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour and were conducted by the researcher in face-to-face settings. Some interviews took place during the school day, while others were done after work hours. Additionally, five interviews were held in the participants’ offices, while the three other participants chose to come to the researcher’s office. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The

transcription was done solely by the researcher within a day or two after each interview was held. Additionally other forms of data were collected (Creswell, 2006), these included the following:

1. demographic questionnaire – As stated previously, its purpose was to assist in pinpointing where the participants are in relation to others and to find out how they perceive their own backgrounds (Patton, 2015).
2. copies of the participants' comprehensive school counseling program plan -- according to the ASCA National Model, school counselors are to design and deliver data-driven comprehensive programs which are based on the standards in academic, career, and personal/social development and promotes achievement for all students. Thus, the school counseling program plan is a written document which showcases a school counseling departments' strategies regarding this expectation (ASCA, 2010).
3. copies of each participants' annual evaluation goal – in the state in which this study is being conducted, all educators are responsible for developing a goal directly related to student achievement as a component of their annual performance evaluation.

The convergence of these various data sources; a) promoted strength in the findings by providing additional insight into if/how school counselors incorporate social justice issues into their planning, b) assisted with the triangulation of the data, and c) contributed to the overall understanding of the school counselors' social justice advocacy phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

## **Data Analysis**

This research employed the four step process of analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994): a) bracketing out one's experiences—the researcher setting aside his or her own experiences and looking at the phenomenon from a fresh perspective, b) identifying all non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements regarding the phenomenon under examination—this is known as horizontalization, c) clustering data into themes to develop textual descriptions--focusing on what the participants actually experienced, and d) seeking multiple meanings of the textual descriptions to create structural descriptions--looking at how the participants experienced the phenomenon in terms of the conditions, situation, and content to communicate a complete essence of the experience.

Additionally, this researcher recruited two individuals to create a research coding team. The first coder is a National Certified Counselor (NCC) and received her Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina's Counselor Education and Supervision program. Additionally, she is a previous school counselor and a current adjunct professor in this field. The second coder is a Ph.D. candidate and a former school counselor. He has also taken several courses in qualitative research.

After the interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the participants, copies were given to both coders to begin the analytical process. The researcher provided each coder with examples of Moustakas' method and encouraged them to handle their analysis of the interview transcripts in the same manner. After each coder completed their analysis, the clusters were compared and themes were developed. The coders then reviewed, compared, and discussed the themes. Both coders proved to be vital contributors in the reading, coding, and interpretation of the data.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Given the identification of this researcher's bias, several data protection measures were implemented throughout this research to augment the dependability and validity of the findings as well as to minimize the effects of researcher bias. Attempting to ensure such trustworthiness included:

*Credibility.* Having credibility means that the research results are believable. One way to ensure this credibility is for the researcher to maintain prolonged engagement and persistent observation. In regards to this method of credibility, the researcher has been a school counselor for 16 years and started researching the topic of social justice advocacy as it relates to school counselors approximately one year ago. Thus, due to her prior and continued investment, she knows the culture, climate, and socialization process of the target population and audience. Moreover, this concept of prolonged engagement transpired through the in-depth interviews which lasted for 45-60 minutes long. Also realizing that prolonged engagement can possibly enhance biasness, the researcher's use of the additional coders allowed her to exercise reflexivity by her preconceived ideas and personal biases into perspective (Buckley, 2010).

*Transferability.* Transferability refers to the possible generalizability of research results to other settings. In an effort to allow others to make this determination, this researcher provided rich descriptions of the entire data collection process and as much information as she could regarding the data interpretations and findings. Also, detailed information regarding the participants' demographic background and employment settings was provided.

*Dependability.* Dependability refers to research results' consistency over time and with different researchers. This researcher increased the dependability of the study's results by utilizing member checks which allowed the participants to view transcripts and to provide feedback to ensure their ideas and experiences were displayed accurately. All of the eight participants felt that the transcriptions were precise and did not see a need for any changes. However, one counselor did ask that the researcher not mention one brief comment she made. She indicated that after reading what she said, she felt it seemed a little harsh, and that was not her intent. Additionally reflective journaling was done as a means to allow this researcher to ponder thoughts, record initial impressions of the data being collected and to consider her own possible developmental interpretations (Shenton, 2004).

*Confirmability.* To have confirmability means that the research findings honestly reflect the perspectives of the study's participants. As this deals directly with the researcher's biases, the intent is to make known this researchers' opinions, possible assumptions, motives, and expectations regarding the research topic and the targeted participants (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). This researcher practiced confirmability in various forms. First, additional coders were employed to analyze and interpret the data. Second, numerous quotes from the participants were provided as support for each of the themes. And third, any biases regarding the research topic and the participants was clearly made known.

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation involves using various methods to ensure that the data collected are accurate. Thus, to address this issue, the following techniques were employed: a)

Reflective journaling -- this allowed the researcher to ponder thoughts, record initial impressions of the data being collected and to consider her own possible developmental interpretations, b) Utilization of two coders – The first coder is a National Certified Counselor (NCC) and received her Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina’s Counselor Education and Supervision program. Additionally, she is a previous school counselor and a current adjunct professor in this field. The second coder is a Ph.D. candidate and a former school counselor. He has also taken several courses in qualitative research. They were both vital components in the reading, coding, and interpretation of the data, c) Member checking -- This allowed participants to view transcripts and other notes to ensure their ideas and experiences were being displayed accurately. Several participants were surprised by their frequent usage of “um”, “you know” and “kind of”, thus those expressions were removed for the purpose of clarity for the reader; however this modification did not jeopardize the truthfulness of the participants’ words. As this was the only concern regarding the transcription, no additional amendments were made, and d) Debriefing – to obtain committee members’ feedback (Shenton, 2004). By encompassing all of these strategies, this researcher believes that she was able to provide a truthful portrayal of the data which emerged concerning the perceptions of school counselors in their role of social justice advocate.

### **Transition Statement**

In this chapter, the researcher delivered the “how” of this study: providing an introduction of how the qualitative methodology was derived from the issue statement, describing the various paradigms of this methodology and justifying the choice of phenomenological research, discussing the role and characteristics of the researcher,

highlighting the proposed interview questions, describing and justifying the procedures to gain access to the participants and establishing the relationship between researcher and participant, discussing the measures for ethical protection of the participants which will be put into place, discussing the participants' criteria and justification of numbers, and lastly, describing in detail the method of data collection and analysis. Chapter four includes a summary of the analysis and a presentation of the results; and lastly, a reflection of finding and an explanation of the significance and implications for future research in the areas of school counselors and social justice advocacy will be discussed in Chapter five.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to obtain high school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies as well as their role in social justice advocacy. The primary data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews. However, other items (participants' goals and school counseling departments' program plan) were also applied. This chapter begins with a summary of the methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis, followed by a presentation of the emergent themes (personal experiences, competence, exposure, diverse populations, programs, collaboration in the schools, community collaboration/resources, and advocacy), and lastly, a synopsis of the findings.

#### **Analysis Summary**

Once the transcription was complete for each participant, she was provided a copy via email to allow her the opportunity to review her transcribed voice. All participants were given a week to revise and edit as they deemed necessary. As the researcher received the "thumbs up" from the participants regarding their transcriptions, copies were given to both coders to begin the analytical process. The researcher also began coding the data based on the "methods and procedures of phenomenal analysis" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118) which included horizontalizing the data, listing the meaning of the horizontalized statements, clustering the list into meaning, and developing textural descriptions and structural descriptions, then integrating those descriptions to construct the essence of the



phenomenon from the eyes of high school counselors (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher provided both coders with examples of this method and encouraged them to handle their analysis of the interview transcripts in the same manner. Moreover, the researcher kept a coding log of terms and clusters resulting from the data interpretation. After each coder completed their analysis, the clusters were compared and themes were developed. The coders then reviewed, compared, and discussed the themes. There was no conflict regarding the findings amongst the coding team members and as a result, the coding alliance gave rise to eight themes that were substantial to the perceptions of high school counselors' knowledge of the ACA competencies and their perceived role in social justice advocacy.

### **Presentation of Results**

The findings of this study resulted in eight themes. The themes are personal experiences, competence, exposure, diverse populations, programs, collaboration in the schools, community collaboration/resources, and advocacy. Interestingly, there is a correlation between these themes and the domains of the ACA advocacy competencies. These connections lie within each level in some form or fashion. For example, in regards to the theme of advocacy, the competencies refers to effective school counseling advocates has having appropriate student, systems, as well as social/political advocacy skills. Additionally, the themes of collaboration in both the schools and community are also explained in the ACA advocacy competencies as a necessary skill for school counselors to exhibit to be considered as a competent social justice advocate. All the themes are apparent within the interview transcriptions. A deep rich textual description of each is reflected in this section. See figure 4.1 for the thematic findings.



*Figure 4.1 Thematic Findings*

***Personal Experiences***

Personal experiences seem to be an appropriate theme in attempting to understand the phenomenon of social justice because it connects back to the two questions guiding this research. Regardless of what an individual encounters or undergoes, experiences whether past or current, often manifest his or her beliefs and/or actions. In reflecting back on this concept of personal experiences, the participants’ responses were quite varied, however, each was honest in indicating that their experiences are a contributing factor to their current stance on social justice. The theme of personal experience is evident in the following participants’ commentaries and plays a key role in providing an understanding of their perceived knowledge of the ACA competency standards and their role as a social justice advocate:

*COUNSELOR 1: The awareness as far as...especially now days with the African American males and, I guess police brutality things, extreme measures, things like that. I*

*guess with social media now, that's honestly the main reason I am more aware of it. A lot of my awareness comes from social media. I have not honestly participated in like different movements...I am not as active as I should be.*

*COUNSELOR 2: I really haven't been a part of anything like that. I don't know if I have lived a sheltered life or just...it's just not something that I truly think about outside of my own personal life. Or it doesn't affect me like it would other people, therefore maybe I ignore it, I am not sure.*

*COUNSELOR 3: In my personal life, I have experienced life working in non-profit organizations that have advocated for social justice, especially for women that have been victims of domestic violence.*

*COUNSELOR 4: We did a closing the achievement gap action plan and results report, and it was basically the different between Caucasian students and minority students on the ACT and we particularly focused on African American males.*

*COUNSELOR 5: As of recently in the past couple of years is seeing the amount of young men, young black males killed by Caucasian police officers or Caucasian males.*

*COUNSELOR 6: I grew up in a town that I don't know if we ever got over certain issues in the world. And I grew up very...with a lot of the same, with a lot of the same minded people and when I went to college, I noticed that not everybody believed what I believed, and not everyone acted the way I acted, and I had to get over myself, because I know, if I only stayed in that small town, small minded, I wouldn't see everything that everybody has to offer...*

*COUNSELOR 7: I think most of what I've experienced has been through the media, so reading about different movements that are going on or kind of getting a better idea of*

*social injustices. Being a sociology major, that was something that we studied a lot,, all the different isms whether ageism, racism, sexism, so I'd say I've learned a lot from the media, I've learned a lot from my college classes, and then personally some of the things I have experienced, I've participated in some different social justice advocate things...The surf-riders foundation, some environmental groups.... I just finished up a book by Bryan Stevenson who started the social justice initiative to work with those that have not been legally represented well, and have been wrongly convicted and have been on death row for years and overturning convictions that were improper and the majority of times, its people from poverty and people of color. And so a lot of reading the news and just kind of looking at the injustices that are out there.*

*COUNSELOR 8: Working in large majority, predominately African American schools has allowed me to see it from a socio-economic standpoint of view. But I have worked in a bit more affluent schools.....in those affluent schools, usually, it was predominately Caucasian populations. In addition, I have also seen across the board, students who have different disabilities, whether it be special education or a 504, ADD. ODD....*

### ***Competence***

As the participants expounded on their experiences in and understanding of social justice advocacy, the concepts of competence and confidence in fulfilling this role emerged. This theme is connected to the participants' perceptions of their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies as well as their understanding of their roles as social justice in that their level of competency directly affects how much they know about the competencies and the expectations that comes along with the role of a social justice advocate as well as their confidence in being able to adequately fulfill this role. Just as

with the theme of personal experiences, the participants' comments in this area were mixed. When asked the question, how prepared do you feel to serve as a social justice advocate in your school, two participants' responses indicated very low competency:

*COUNSELOR 2: Not prepared at all.*

*COUNSELOR 6: Completely unprepared. I think that...I'm new and I graduated in May, and this is my first job and I love it. I wouldn't do anything else if I had the opportunity...but, I don't feel prepared to help the kids in the way that they really need it because I feel like there are such hot button issues like transgender; and race is still an issue, and socio-economic status is still...there still are issues...*

One participant showed a high level of competence:

*COUNSELOR 8: Oh very prepared. Being that I have been in a lot of different types and kinds of schools, I feel like I could probably go anywhere and be able to advocate for the students at that school regardless of their situation. I really do try to look for the good in each of my students and so I feel like whether they are coming from a broken home or no money, no car, nothing, I feel like I can, we can find something to advocate for them for.*

While others believe that they are okay when it comes to feeling competent in being a social justice advocate:

*COUNSELOR 3: I feel moderately prepared, somewhat between moderately to well prepared. I definitely don't feel like I am the expert. And again, I think that stems back to what I said early on in our conversation in regards to just not knowing what's next and I feel like I'm confident in knowing what to do now, but it's just that there is no knowledge of what happens down the road.*

*COUNSELOR 4: Well, I mean, as counselors, part of our job is to advocate for all students, and so, the key to that is recognizing the students that are not coming with the same...recognizing students that have barriers that impact their learning and also their personal and social development. And so, if we are advocates for that then, recognizing those students, looking for signs, and trying to help, either getting through community, school, administration, your leadership team to try to implement programs to help those students.*

*COUNSELOR 5: I think with certain topics, I am pretty comfortable with it, but I guess the topics that are not, I guess socially accepted, makes me a little nervous*

*COUNSELOR 7: I would say somewhat. I feel like it is kind of our job as counselors to self-educate a little bit on that. It's like, there is not necessarily a training out there, a power point presentation on it. That is something that should be somewhat innate in why we got into the field to begin with, but I do feel like we would be better prepared if we had more resources dedicated to social advocacy in the schools. I feel like that's typically not where the priority is—resources meaning money, programs...*

Irrespective of which level of competency the participants believed that they were in, all agreed with the latter participant's response in that some form of preparation is needed to assist high school counselors in becoming better social justice advocates for all students. Thus the common theme of exposure (graduate level and/or professional development) was revealed.

### ***Exposure***

Exposure was identified as a theme because of the numerous responses received from the participants concerning its importance (whether it was expressed as having a lot

of or needing more of). Its linkage between the research questions is similar to competency in that the level in which a school counselor has may affect his or her perceptions of knowledge and role expectations. Participants were asked three questions regarding views of what that preparation would entail; a) what helps or would help you to be a successful social justice advocate in your school, b) what recommendations would you suggest to help training programs adequately prepare school counselors-in-training to serve as social justice advocates in their prospective schools, and c) what suggestions do you have for professional development for practicing school counselors. Whether, it is participating in data training, immersion activities, or multicultural training, receiving information on referral sources, or just making school counselors aware of issues, the majority of the responses linked to the need for school counselors to be more exposed to the matters that they believe affect their role in social justice advocacy. The following are the various participants' responses as they relate to the theme, exposure:

Question a) what helps or would help you be a successful social justice advocate in your school?

*COUNSELOR 1: Definitely more awareness and more knowledge about situations that are going on, cause like I said, the things that I am aware of are just the things that are specifically that come across my desk or that I see. I need to be aware of like what is going on in the community as well as what' going on in the world instead of what just comes across my social media.*

*COUNSELOR 2: We get training on information like from Trident at our monthly PLC meetings, but nothing in this, nothing...we have never had training. And I think that would be where I would need it the most...And that would be something I would love to*

*do...one, to understand it even better because I can sit here and say, yea, I understand the definition that you are asking me about, but seeing it, truly seeing it? I don't think I have in my school setting. Or I am just oblivious to it and that could be it too.*

*COUNSELOR 3: Probably some more continued training. Just speaking with professionals or hearing from experts, individuals in regards to...my biggest thing is the next. While we have done our small piece at the school, what's next for the families? Cause a lot of times...and it may be similar in your school, parents call the school first for the counselor. And, we are the referral service for the school. But it is just, I think that could be a deterrent for the parent if the person they call at the school has no knowledge, or limited knowledge, or just not helpful in even just referring, and so as long as we have some knowledge and are able to refer individuals appropriately, I think that would be beneficial.*

*COUNSELOR 4: Effective data that is assessable.*

*COUNSELOR 5: I think definitely reading up more on the ACA advocacy competencies and getting more experience as being an advocate.*

*COUNSELOR 6: I think that we need training, and I think that we need somebody to say, not do better, but this is how you can do better. And I think that I also need, I need to find kids who are willing to tell me how it is.*

Question b) what recommendations would you suggest to help training programs adequately prepare school counselors-in-training to serve as social justice advocates in their prospective schools?

*COUNSELOR 2: I would say in particular, I had to do a cultural immersion project in my program and I actually had to spend an entire weekend with a family of a different*



*culture and I chose my next store neighbor who is from the Philippines...I think that a cultural immersion project, if it is done correctly is a big help...any type of cultural immersion to get an idea of what anybody from a different culture comes from, that would be my recommendation.*

*COUNSELOR 4: Well, I definitely think your multicultural class is helpful and any of your data, statistical counseling classes are very helpful, but as educators, you get data all the time and you are expected to know data, but what does good data look like? Is it process, is it perception? How can you show that what you are doing is clearly making a change? And so, I think if you are implementing programs and you are seeing the change, then you are helping with social justice.*

*COUNSELOR 5: I think we probably need more classes on social justice and being an advocate because I don't think it is really a big focus in graduate school programs. It's maybe one or two classes....*

*COUNSELOR 6: I think that the more exposure you have, the more you are prepared for anything.*

*COUNSELOR 7: I think exposure is the number one thing. Because I grew up in a public school, I feel like I grew up with exposure to a lot of difference people from a lot of difference backgrounds, but I definitely seen people in graduate school that you can tell that they came from a very different reality...I think if you have been raised in a bubble, it's very easy for you to kind of hold this idea of judgement... I remember in graduate school there was a lot of kids that had gone to private schools, and when they looked at the culture of poverty, they seemed to look at it from a pretty judgmental standpoint, and I think that you are not going to be a good advocate if that is your idea, so I think you*

*need to immerse yourself in and actually expose yourself to the reality of how things are actually working out there.... When it comes to the internships and practicums that they do, instead of just allowing students to choose a school, maybe they need to get an idea of because I will even say on my part, I didn't have a whole lot of exposure to the real high performing kids. I came from a background where I was working in group homes...I felt like it took me some exposure to have the same amount of compassion and empathy for the kids that their parents expect them to have straight "As" all the time and yea, they might be driving a BMW to school....I guess just getting outside of your own reality of what you've experienced and getting, doing internships or volunteering or something in an environment that is not typical of what you are used to.*

Question c) what suggestions do you have for professional development for practicing school counselors?

COUNSELOR 1: *I feel like, like I said, awareness of situations going on like current situations. And then also more trainings or workshops on like cultural diversity.*

*Definitely more awareness for the faculty, and if it gets to the point of just having like conversations with the students....*

COUNSELOR 2: *Definitely some kind of professional development that it's not just one day. It's a consecutive type of training that is renewed each year because each year those social justices, depending on what's going on in, within our society. So, I think that it's, yea, just being aware of those things. How to be aware of it in your school, how to recognize it, how to recognize what's happening with your school....*

COUNSELOR 4: *I mean anything you can...community organization, or whether it is business related that's seeing trends in the community. Whether it's a professional*

*development on substance abuse and who in community...I mean where is the crime happening or the most need happening that mental health counselors are seeing...having professional development on identifying trends in the community, obviously career awareness, helping under represented students get access to more career options and making a connection to a career field....*

*COUNSELOR 7: Well I think just looking at things from a social justice perspective, I feel like a lot of the training and things that we go to are kind of more in line from an educator's...but I don't know how much time we are looking at the variable of social justice... I would say, professional development that addresses social justice specifically.*

*COUNSELOR 8: More in-depth professional development on how to deal with LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) students...I think that is a good one, but making it in depth with a lot of practice.*

### ***Diverse Populations***

The population of LGBT students along with other groups of students also surfaced in several of the participants' responses when discussing marginalized students. This identification of marginalized students generated the fourth theme of diverse populations. This theme is prevalent as previously indicated in chapter three, "full acceptance of diversity is a major principle of social justice" (National Education Association, n.d., para. 1). Thus, an understanding of each participants' work setting and thoughts regarding diversity aids in the understanding of the answers to the questions guiding this research. Repeated comments were made regarding various groups such as the LGBT, African American, ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages), and special education populations, as well as students of low socio-economic status.

COUNSELOR 1: *There is an academic portion of it, like those students who like for some reason or another, they weren't...their academic needs weren't being met.... The socio-economic status portion, those kids whose families are going through situations....*

COUNSELOR 2: *As far as our poverty...probably that group would be the one that we identify the most with....*

COUNSELOR 3: *A lot of our social justices and injustices stem from, we are a Title I school and so our first, I would say social justice is those who...especially the population receiving free and reduced lunch.*

COUNSELOR 4: *...our Hispanic population, our African American population, especially boys...our transgender population, our at-risk students that may have few credits going into their third year of high school...our homeless population.*

COUNSELOR 5: *I would say maybe the students that are homeless, maybe they don't have the appropriate credits for their grades.*

COUNSELOR 6: *I think those are the students who aren't given all of the resources that other students have. We have a transgender community in our school, and it's not receptive, some of the other students are not receptive, some parents are not receptive. I see a lot of injustice based off of socio-economic status, the kids that have and the kids that have not.*

COUNSELOR 7: *I think that we have a great amount of diversity in our school, so there are definitely social justice issues related to students that are dealing with having much less support and resources that other students.... I feel like in most cases, it comes down to socio-economic status. I feel like there is definitely the students that are the minorities face more challenges....*

COUNSELOR 8: *ESOL students, special education students.*

In listening to and reviewing the statements made by the participants about the students they identify as marginalized, the evidence of special programming was apparent in several of the schools and/or school districts in which the participants are employed. Based on the comments made, the fifth theme was deemed as programs.

### ***Programs***

From the questions, a) what types of social justice-related issues do you see in your school, b) what are you doing to help your marginalized students, c) describe your current school counseling program, and d) what is your role and responsibility in this program, the responses from several of the participants showcased the programs initiated by their own school counseling program or by the school or district. As a result, programs was determined a theme. It has a direct connection to the ACA advocacy competencies and the role expectations of a social justice advocate in that a key factor in providing social justice to all students and ensuring a fair and equal education, programs must be developed based on data to level the playing field for marginalized students. The following are some of the participants' responses:

COUNSELOR 2: *And I'll give you a group in particular, is our STAR Academy kids....*

*These students, the majority of them are from very poor backgrounds. They have...some of them have mental issues in that they can still function in the real world, but a lot of it is, they come with issues with self-esteem. They are behind and so we put, behind age wise so we put them in the STAR Academy, and we follow that group...and we check on them at progress, we arrange for them parent/teacher conferences if we can get the parents here. We also, if they are falling behind, refer them to Multi-Tier Support System*

*(MTSS) process where the team of teachers come together, we try to figure strategies to help make them successful within the classroom and outside the classroom if it is a behavior issue as well.*

*COUNSELOR 3: I am currently serving as the counseling director, and staffed with two full time counselors and a part time GEAR UP counselor, who is a certified school counselor, and I have a Community and Schools counselor who is not a certified school counselor, but has a counseling background and who serves us with a caseload of students that are promoting graduation rates and a lot of those students are identified whether they have 1<sup>st</sup> generation, college bound potential, or if they are candidates who are not living with the natural parents, or may be living with a single parent.... And they just receive a lot of additional support from that counselor through groups, though...she took a group today to the clinics for some health assistance.... Our GEAR UP counselor is specific, that grant was written for students that are currently 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders and she moves up with them....*

Although Counselor 3 did not go into detail regarding the GEAR UP program, this researcher was aware of GEAR UP which stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs and is a federally funded program. It typically serves students enrolled in Title I schools and is designed to increase the number of low socio-economic status students entering and being successful in postsecondary education.

*COUNSELOR 4: Whether, any particular group, but like our lesbian, gay, and transgender population and we have kind of helped support a club called Spectrum, and referring students so that we may have a counseling session with the student's who's struggling with either sexual identity issues....*

*We certainly see especially amongst African Americans a difference in test scores...that was even evident with our 11<sup>th</sup> grade ACT exam that we had as far as college readiness, and so we worked with our kind of graduation accountability specialist and worked with her to try to develop a grant, and that grant would provide...kind of help with some things, especially in the science areas where certain population scores, like our Hispanic population, our African American population, especially boys in both of those scored lower than some of the other subgroups.*

*We also, looking at the target population like our at-risk students that may have few credits going into their third year of high school. We have had some groups and meetings with those students. We have also done some...even with your homeless population, identifying students more quickly...doing teacher trainings to look at qualifications of homelessness and students who are in need.*

*COUNSELOR 7: As the Prevention and Intervention counselor, my job is to provide services for those students that have extra challenges in graduating on time or being to school on time, whether it's attendance or grades for whatever reason they aren't performing to their full potential, and so my job is to kind of get the roadblocks out of the way to get them on track.*

*COUNSELOR 8: I have seen where there has been a big push recently for diversity in our schools. To try to increase or bridge the gaps in achievement for students in a lot of schools, the African American population's achievement have been at a lower rate in some schools, so I have seen a lot of different programs be put into place to try to get them to a higher level whether it is being afterschool programs, mentors, extra tutoring....*

While several of the participants indicated that some of the former programs were solely school counselor initiated and coordinated, others discussed programs that were district or school led. A result of this disclosure leads to the sixth theme, which is collaboration within the schools. The majority of the participants stressed that there is definitely a need for this component in an effort to truly serve as social justice advocates for all students. The theme of collaboration is associated with the understanding of this research's participants' perceptions of the advocacy competencies and their role in social justice advocacy because of its importance in this phenomenon.

### ***Collaboration within the Schools***

COUNSELOR 2: *We also, if they are falling behind, refer them to Multi-Tier Support System (MTSS) process where the team of teachers, we come together, we try to figure strategies to help make them successful within the classroom and outside the classroom if it is a behavior issue as well.*

COUNSELOR 3: *And so, I think a lot of times as educators, we, there is a disconnect because everyone thinks, well this is that person's job and not understanding that this is everyone's job, like this is a collaborative effort....*

COUNSELOR 4: *And to then through that plan, we hired, no not hired, we had somebody come in and speak to our math department did some training to look at different skills that particular group may have scored poorly on and then we worked with the students.*

*And so we worked with our kind of graduation accountability specialist and worked on a grant....*

*So, our district is piloting, we had our technology team, they developed a program called The Brain, which is kind of a step up from a data warehouse. And so we*



*have been giving feedback as far as particular reports that we would like to see run based on either gender or ethnicity or something that would also help identify groups in which there may be more need.*

*I mean, I think that with time and effective programming, we do have a forum to enact a lot of good that can help students in our schools, but I also think it's a collaboration between you the 100 school initiatives that are coming down from the state, the district, or administration, or to try to get...link those a little bit. Cause teachers are getting hit with different initiatives along with counselors and so it's more of...I think it has to be a team effort and a team awareness that we can help facilitate.*

*COUNSELOR 6: We meet with teachers a lot, we have, we kind of bridge a gap between teachers that we know what the teachers are doing, and they know what we do. We have departmental meetings, and we go to those and say, what can we do to help your classes and here's what we need from yall.*

*COUNSELOR 8: So the administrators are on board and they are very supportive in doing what works for the student.*

Just as it is important to be in collaboration with key players involved in students' lives within the school setting, the participants of this study also talked about the need for connections to community resources. Some participants were able to provide examples of this partnership whereas others expressed a concern for the lack of community involvement.

### ***Community Collaboration/Resources***

*COUNSELOR 1: Not so much on the community collaboration. I feel like honestly, the as far as we go is with outside mental health referrals. Maybe providing information as far*

*as like if the family has been displaced, like homeless shelters, things like that, places. I feel like the only community collaboration we have are with mental health counselors and maybe like financial need for families as well as placement for them.*

*COUNSELOR 2: Finding the resources even though we have the resources in the county, reaching out to support groups for them and that's reaching out...we have a church that we work with here and they work closely with our homeless students and families in transition and they actually...I call them, I needed help with a family, the father was laid off, the mother could not find a job, brought the social work in, she helped them fill out job applications and the church helped them move to more affordable housing.*

*COUNSELOR 5: I feel that we probably could collaborate a little bit more with the community to bring more people in as a resource for our students...but let's say if a student is homeless, I would definitely try to help them with different resources in the community, maybe like the food bank. Places where they can get clothing, assistance with maybe food stamps, point them in the direction where they can receive assistance....*

*COUNSELOR 6: ...if we got more community involvement, if we had guest speakers, if we had students that could travel to different job sites, that we could do field trips and kind of break these gaps for these kids that say, I grew up in this type of neighborhood and people in my neighborhood only do this...maybe you don't have to do that, that's what I want for my kids, I want them to know that they have the options.*

*COUNSELOR 7: I'd like to see great wrap around services like when you hear of thing like the Continuum of Care, that should exist within a school, you know? And I think that we should have access to different social service products within a school system. I would*

*love to see them get their minimum health care here, like getting their eyes checked and ears checked, and certain things like that. Dental cleanings, I think that should be in a school, and so yea! I can go on a tangent and start building a school, but I won't do all that.*

Throughout the entire data collection process, regardless of what other themes surfaced, each participant strongly believed in the concept of advocacy. Whether or not they ever took the time to connect what they do to promote social justice advocacy, this term resonated during each interview. It was used not only as an expectation in their role as a school counselor for students, but also as a means of protecting their position. Thus the final theme that was developed is that of advocacy. Advocacy's link to the research questions is that it is the topic at hand. Comprehending high school counselors' thought about advocacy assists in developing a better understanding of their perceptions. The following are the copious ways in which this expression was used by the participants.

***Advocacy***

COUNSELOR 1: *...because that's our role as a school counselor, to advocate for the student.*

COUNSELOR 2: *...Because I tend to advocate a lot for my kids, not based on who they are or the color of their skin or where they are from. I just advocate because they are my kids and I take care of them on my caseload.*

COUNSELOR 3: *...I feel like we are at work to support and help the students, and to be those advocates for them....*

COUNSELOR 4: *I mean, we are advocates for all students...*

*Counselors' primary role is to serve as advocate for all students.*

*COUNSELOR 5: Well, I think that for myself and along with the other counselors in our school counseling program, I feel that we definitely advocate for our students. I definitely want to make sure I advocate for my students that may be struggling or having some difficulties. .... I think it is easier when you are trying to help other people advocate, but sometimes not as easy to advocate for yourself, even though you are telling your students they should advocate for themselves.*

*COUNSELOR 6: Advocacy to me is more my role.*

*COUNSELOR 7: Well I think on one part it is kind of serving as an advocate because something that I have learned is that a lot of these students may not have the adult at home that is pushing them or is telling them that they are capable of more, or is encouraging them....*

*COUNSELOR 8: To be an advocate you really have to have a regard for students in general, every type, every kind, even the consistent offender. You really have to be able to be a proponent of their success and that means a lot of times taking the personal out and looking for what is going to be best for them.*

As briefly mentioned in the discussion of each theme, the findings provided significant correlations to both of the research questions posed. The association between these themes and the review of the literature will be discussed in chapter five.

In addition to interviews and the demographic questionnaire, the school counselors' individual evaluation annual goals and information regarding their comprehensive school counseling program plan were reviewed. As mentioned in chapter three, these documents served as a means to strengthen the findings by showing if/how school counselors consider social justice in their planning, to assist with the triangulation

of the data, and to provide a contribution to the overall interpretation of this phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Table 4.1 presents a view of the counselors' goals. Counselors one and six did not have individual goals, but provided their school counseling department's goals. See table 4.1 for the goals from each high school counselor.

*Table 4.1 School Counselors' Annual Goals*

School Counselors	Annual Evaluation Goals
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase parent participation during IGP (Individual Graduation Planning) meetings.</li> <li>• Create a student-centered culture through school-wide activities.</li> <li>• Increase stakeholders' involvement/awareness through communication outlets as evidence by rate of use.</li> <li>• Bridge the counselor-teacher gap.</li> <li>• Address student needs through small groups.</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review data (grades, attendance, and behavior) and implement researched-based counseling strategies to improve student achievement.</li> </ul> <p><b><i>Rationale: Promote the academic success of at-risk students.</i></b></p>
3	Promote a positive school culture by promoting 3 college and career ready campaigns.
4	Increase parent and community involvement. <b><i>Rationale: Studies consistently show improved relations between schools and parents and community yield better test scores and student achievement.</i></b>
5	Increase parental involvement by 20% from the previous year by using Remind 101 (text message program) for the IGP process.
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase parent participation during IGP (Individual Graduation Planning) meetings.</li> <li>• Create a student-centered culture through school-wide activities.</li> <li>• Increase stake-holders involvement/awareness through communication outlets as evidence by rate of use.</li> <li>• Bridge the counselor-teacher gap.</li> <li>• Address student needs through small groups.</li> </ul>
7	Increase the number of Prevention and Intervention (at-risk students: defined as students who are not on track to graduate on time) complete college applications.
8	To help align student strengths and interests to post-secondary goals, and improve student outcomes through the use of Naviance (college and career readiness program). Naviance empowers students and families to connect learning and life and provides schools and districts with the information they need to help students prepare for life after high school.

	It also allows students to create a plan for their futures by helping them discover their individual strengths and learning styles and explore college and career options based on their results.
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Moreover, in regards to the comprehensive school counseling program plan, the majority of the counselors did not produce a written copy, but informed the researcher that their department was aligned to the state and national standards. Additionally, as one counselor mentioned that this information was on her school counselors' webpage, this researcher decided to view all the school counseling department webpages in which the counselors are employed. From this review, the following information was discovered:

**Counselor 1:** A mission statement is displayed suggesting that the department's services encourage every student to achieve, however there was no indication of a comprehensive plan.

**Counselor 2:** A statement is showcased indicating this department's alignment to the national and state standards. The site also provides links to the a) ASCA national standards b) SC Comprehensive Developmental Guidance and Counseling Program Model, and c) Elements of the ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs.

**Counselor 3:** A mission statement is displayed with a statement indicating that the department's services are based on ASCA's National Program model, however a comprehensive plan was not found.

**Counselor 4:** The mission statement implies that the counselors in this department are advocates for all students, however no comprehensive plan was noted.

**Counselor 5:** The mission statement and philosophy denotes that the department's responsibility is to advocate for all students and that their services are based on the ASCA national model, however the comprehensive plan was not found.

**Counselor 6:** A mission statement is displayed suggesting that the department's services encourages every student to achieve, however, there was no indication of a comprehensive plan.

**Counselor 7:** The mission statement and philosophy denotes that the department's responsibility is to advocate for all students and that their services are based on the ASCA national model, however the comprehensive plan was not found.

**Counselor 8:** There was not a separate webpage for the department on their school's website.

The findings of this data collection provided beneficial information to this current research. For example, although most of the participants' school counseling's mission statement denoted the importance of services being geared towards all students (a possible indication of the intention of social justice advocacy), out of the eight participants' goals which were provided, only two specially focuses on the needs of a marginalized student population (at-risk), while the remaining six high school counselors' goals indicate a universal concentration and does not appear to identify specific social justice issues.

Secondly, granting the majority of the participants implied that their program is aligned with the South Carolina Comprehensive Developmental Guidance and Counseling Program Model, they were not able to produce a physical copy, nor was the program plan found as a link on the majority of the school counseling webpages. Also, it is important to note that S.C.'s program model was last updated in 2008 (S.C. Guidance & Counseling Writing Team, 2008) and does not completely line up with the latest 2012

version of ASCA’s program model (ASCA, 2012). A few of the most prominent differences are illustrated in the table below.

*Table 4.2 South Carolina and ASCA Program Model Differences*

<b>Areas</b>	<b>South Carolina</b>	<b>ASCA</b>
<b>Components</b>	Three--Delivery Accountability Evaluation	Four--Foundation Management Delivery Accountability
<b>Content of Delivery</b>	Suggested % Rate of High School Counselors’ Time Distribution:  *Guidance Curriculum: 15-25 *Individual Planning: 25-35 *Responsive Services: 25-35 *System Support: 15-20	80% or more of all school counselors time should be spend in direct and indirect services:  *School Counseling Core Curriculum *Individual Student Planning *Responsive Services *Indirect are services provided on behalf of the student (i.e. referrals, consultation, etc.)
<b>ACA Advocacy Competencies’ Evident</b>	No--although there is mention of using data for program develop.	Yes—statements within the Management component: * Use of student data to measure the results of the program as well as to promote systemic change within the school system so every student graduates college and career ready. * Curriculum small groups, and closing the achieve gap action plans including prevention and intervention activities and services that define the desired student competencies and measure the impact on achievement, behavior and attendance.



## **Trustworthiness of Results**

Given the identification of this researcher's bias, several data protection measures were implemented throughout this research to augment the dependability and validity of the findings, as well as to minimize the effects of researcher bias. Attempting to ensure such trustworthiness will include:

*Credibility.* Having credibility means that the research results are believable. One way to ensure this credibility is for the researcher to maintain prolonged engagement and persistent observation. In regards to this method of credibility, the researcher has been a school counselor for 16 years and started researching the topic of social justice advocacy as it relates to school counselors approximately one year ago. Thus, due to her prior and continued investment, she knows the culture, climate, and socialization process of the target population and audience. Moreover, this concept of prolonged engagement transpired through the in-depth interviews which lasted for 45-60 minutes long. Also, realizing that prolonged engagement can possibly enhance biasness, the researcher's use of the additional coders allowed her to exercise reflexivity.

*Transferability.* Transferability refers to the possible generalizability of research results to other settings. In an effort to allow others to make this determination, this researcher provided rich descriptions of the entire data collection process and as much information as she could regarding the data interpretations and findings. Also, detailed information regarding the participants' demographic background and employment settings was provided.

*Dependability.* Dependability refers to research results' consistency over time and with different researchers. This researcher increased the dependability of the study's results by

utilizing member checks which allowed the participants to view transcripts and to provide feedback to ensure their ideas and experiences were displayed accurately. All of the eight participants felt that the transcriptions were precise and did not see a need for any changes. However, one counselor did ask that the researcher not mention one brief comment she made. She indicated that after reading what she said, she felt it seemed a little harsh, and that was not her intent. Additionally reflective journaling was done as a means to allow this researcher to ponder thoughts, record initial impressions of the data being collected and to consider her own possible developmental interpretations (Shenton, 2004).

*Confirmability.* To have confirmability means that the research findings honestly reflect the perspectives of the study's participants. As this deals directly with the researcher's biases, the intent is to make known this researchers' opinions, possible assumptions, motives, and expectations regarding the research topic and the targeted participants (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). This researcher practiced confirmability in various forms. First, additional coders were employed to analyze and interpret the data. Second, numerous quotes from the participants were provided as support for each of the themes. And third, any biases regarding the research topic and the participants was clearly made known.

## **Summary**

In chapter four, a summary of the analysis was presented and the findings of interviews conducted with eight high school counselors were portrayed in eight themes. These themes were personal experiences, competence, exposure, diverse populations, programs, collaboration in the schools, community collaboration/resources, and

advocacy. This chapter also provided supporting quotes which were obtained from the participants' interpretations. Chapter five will show the linkage between the previous literature reviews to the results of the data collection. Additionally, this study's limitations, and future implications and research will be offered.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **REFLECTION ON THE FINDINGS**

#### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to acquire high school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role as a social justice advocates. This final chapter of this research study provides the following: a) an overview of the study, b) a linkage between previous literature and this study's findings, c) assumptions, scope, and limitations, and d) the significance of the study (implications for counselor educators, school administrators/district, and school counselors). Moreover, possible future research is considered, this researcher's reflection is shared, and a summary is provided.

#### **Overview**

School counselors are considered to be the ideal school personnel to serve as social justice advocates (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). As a result, various organizations and governing entities such as the NCTSC, ASCA, and CACREP have worked extensively to provide school counselors with mandates, initiatives, and more to ensure school counselors are prepared for this mission. Moreover, a social justice advocacy framework designed solely for school counselors based the ACA advocacy competencies was developed (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). The goals of this study were to first, obtain an understanding of high school counselors' knowledge regarding the ACA

advocacy competencies, and second, discover how they view their role as a social justice advocate particularly as it relates to the incorporation of the ACA advocacy competencies.

This research was a qualitative-phenomenological study which explored the world of high school counselors. The principal research questions were:

1. What are school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies?
2. How do high school counselors perceive their roles relating to social justice advocacy?

The main source of data collection was via face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with eight high school counselors in a tri-county area in the southeastern region of the United States. The participants were theoretically (purposefully) selected based on their potential contribution to the development of this research (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). Based on the criteria, each participant came from a diverse school setting representing all educational levels, consisting of at least three different ethnicities, and having at least  $\frac{1}{4}$  of their students on free and reduced lunch. Their commentaries provided a wealth of rich descriptive information about the social justice advocacy phenomenon and the findings of this research embodies their lived experiences. These encounters were obtained from the transcripts of their semi-structured interviews. Each participant was asked the following questions in their interview:

General Questions:

- What have you experienced in terms of social justice advocacy?

- What situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of social justice advocacy?

#### Other Open-ended Questions

1. Describe your current school counseling program.
2. What is your role and responsibility in this program?
3. What is social justice to you?
4. What is advocacy to you?
5. Where do your definitions of social justice and advocacy stem from?
6. What types of social justice-related issues do you see in your school?
7. How do you define your marginalized students?
8. What are you doing to help your marginalized students?
9. How do you explain your current stance as a social justice advocate?
10. How prepared do you feel to serve as a social justice advocate in your school?
11. What helps or would help you to be a successful social justice advocate in your school?
12. What recommendations would you suggest to help training programs adequately prepare school counselors-in-training to serve as social justice advocates in their prospective schools? What suggestions do you have for professional development for practicing school counselors?
13. Please take a moment to discuss any other information that you would like to add related to your experiences with social justice advocacy as a school counselor.

All interviews were transcribed by the sole researcher and then coded by the researcher and two other individuals. The results produced eight themes: personal experiences,

competence, exposure, diverse populations, programs, collaboration in the schools, community collaboration/resources, and advocacy which afforded an understanding of the participants' overall perceptions of their role as a high school counselor. Furthermore, the participants' annual evaluation goals and the department's comprehensive program plans were examined to assist with the triangulation of the data and to strengthen the finding of this study.

### **Linkage to the Literature Review**

A review of the literature provided information relating to social justice and advocacy definitions as well as school counselors' knowledge of and perceptions regarding some of their additional roles and expectations. This section discusses how the results of this study are connected to these concepts.

#### ***Definitions of Social Justice and Advocacy***

In an attempt to make certain that the participants and the researcher were in accordance regarding the definitions of social justice and advocacy, the participants were asked the questions, "What is social justice to you?" and "What is advocacy to you?" Each participant's response was consistent with the definitions provided in chapter two of this study. In the literature review, it was indicated that Bell (2007) described social justice as:

full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure (p.1).

And that, Jun (2010) asserted, “social justice evolves around providing equality and justice for all people regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, age, language, religion, and region” (p. 324). The following are the participants’ definitions for social justice:

COUNSELOR 1: *I think social justice is just everyone being treated equally.*

COUNSELOR 2: *Social justice? I guess the first thing that just came to my mind is everyone treated fairly. Not based on anything other than that they are just human beings.*

COUNSELOR 3: *Social justice for me personally is probably just a feeling. Just a feeling that an individual has whether they were a victim of an incident or whether they were treated unfairly that they sought some support in some fashion and where there was a victory in the end.*

COUNSELOR 4: *I mean, I guess in my mind, social justice would be identifying a group of individuals based on a certain likeness that may be under represented or not given the same particular information or rights as say another group.*

COUNSELOR 5: *In my opinion, social justice is being fair and equal to everyone.*

COUNSELOR 6: *Okay, social justice to me, I think social justice is based off of treating everyone the same, regardless of race, religion, socio-economic status. I think it’s trying...it’s promoting to students that everyone deserves a fair opportunity regardless of where you come from, you can become whatever you want to be.*

COUNSELOR 7: *Social justice to me is ensuring that every student is offered the same opportunities, has the same level of support, and has access to the same programs that*



*any other student does so that nothing is based on where they come from, or what they look like, or who they are, or socio-economic status, race, or anything like that.*

*COUNSELOR 8: I think honestly, it means making all things equal in all areas, whether it be leveling the playing field. Like I said, if they have something that they are missing or a disability, or opening a program to everyone, not just a specific group of kids being targeted...making it open for anybody who wants to be a part of it.*

Moreover, in chapter two, it was indicated that “advocacy involves identifying unmet needs and taking actions to change the circumstances that contribute to the problem or inequity” (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 259), and that it refers to taking the principles of social justice and putting them into action (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). The replies from the participants regarding advocacy were not as consistent as that of social justice, but within each statement, there was the common idea of the word “action”. This premise was evident by their use of such words as support, helping, and encourage.

*COUNSELOR 1: Just anyone who comes and who encounters a situation or who knows about the situation, just making sure that if it is a student or if it is someone out on the streets, just making sure you are, one if you are able to helping them to find the resources that they need or to get help, or just making it known that, hey, this is going on, we need to change this.*

*COUNSELOR 2: ....it could be supporting someone to reach a goal, or to as far as reaching the goal, it could be advocating for the student if they need help reaching a goal, or if something has affected them....*

*COUNSELOR 3: Advocacy is just the opportunity to support and encourage anyone.*

*COUNSELOR 4: Advocacy would be supporting to help even the playing field amongst all students.*

*COUNSELOR 5: Advocacy is basely, I would say...my opinion is helping people that may feel they don't have a voice.*

*COUNSELOR 6: Advocacy to me is more my role. It's me putting my feet to the ground, and I have ideas in my head. A lot of people have ideas in their heads of ways that they think that they could better the world, but if their ideas...it doesn't...that's not action, and there is a big difference between ideas and action. And advocacy to me is action....*

*COUNSELOR 7: Advocacy to me is speaking up in the best interest of the student. ...speaking on their behalf.*

*COUNSELOR 8: Being a proponent of, for something, whether it be a student, a program, an idea. And basically working to support that and try to promote it....*

Additionally, in the literature review, it was pointed out that Kiselica and Robinson (2001) described advocacy as counselors going beyond the traditional method of providing only direct services to also offering indirect services involving outside organizations. Moreover, Field and Baker (2004) deemed that school counselors should go beyond the four walls of their office to obtain resources and interventions that will allow them to advocate for individual students, groups, and issues. The basis of these definitions can be found in the themes of programs, collaboration in the schools, and community collaboration/ resources as a great deal of the participants were able to showcase their involvement with programs and organizations outside of their department.

### ***Perceived Knowledge of Various Counseling Areas***

Research question number one is regarding high school counselors' perceived knowledge regarding the ACA advocacy competencies which were developed to assist all counselors (including school counselors) to become effective social justice advocates. However, these expected competencies are a part of a long list of other skills and tasks school counselors are presumed to have an awareness of. Because of this notion, their perceived knowledge of various other subject areas/proficiencies were reviewed in chapter two in an effort to determine if they believed they had the knowledge to perform their numerous tasks efficiently. In relation to the current study, this is an area of interest as this researcher attempted to ascertain the participants' perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies. This section showcased various articles regarding school counselors' major role of assisting with the social/personal, academic, and career development of all students (ASCA, 2005). Within the social/personal area, there are various components such as conducting group counseling, individual counseling, and crisis counseling. Due to the possible nature of such counseling, school counselors should be knowledgeable about an assortment of personal/social issues that are affecting today's student. In regards to this domain, Price, Desmond, & Price (1990) conducted a quantitative study which explored school counselors' knowledge of adolescent eating disorders. The results of this study revealed that the majority of school counselors surveyed were knowledgeable about the signs and symptoms of eating disorders, but the majority also believed that they were either moderately competent or not very competent in helping students with this condition. Another quantitative study addressing the social/personal realm was conducted by Roberts-Dobie and Donatelle (2007). It focused

on school counselors' knowledge as it relates to self-injuries. The overall results showed that although the bulk of school counselors reported working with students who self-injure, they believed that more training is needed in order to perform the role more efficiently.

Granting these studies pertain to the knowledge of issues and skills, they are linked to the findings of this study as they provide an example of expected knowledge on the school counselors' part. However, those expectations are somewhat different from their actual perceived knowledge. For example, just as students with social issues are referred to school counselors because it is assumed that they are knowledgeable about those matters, competencies are put in place with the belief that school counselors will know them and possess the necessary skills to execute them. However, when the participants of this study were asked a follow up question to where do your definitions of social justice and advocacy stem from regarding their familiarity with the ACA advocacy competencies, two responded that they were familiar, three indicated somewhat, and three had no knowledge of them at all.

Moreover, since the majority of the participants indicated somewhat or no knowledge of the competencies, during the interview, this researcher provided a copy of the ACA advocacy competencies' document for each participant to view for approximately ten minutes. After viewing the competencies, the participants' were asked the question, how do you see them fitting into your day to day activities. This was done in an effort to determine which advocacy skills they believed they may or may not process. Counselors two, four, and eight felt confident in stating that they are currently employing all domains of the competencies; client/student empowerment, client/student

advocacy, community collaboration, systems advocacy, public information, and social/political advocacy in some form or fashion. However, they agreed that there is room for improvement in all areas. Counselors one, five, and six indicated they believed that they do a good job when it comes to student empowerment and advocacy, but acknowledged that community collaboration, systems advocacy, public information, and social/political advocacy are their weak areas. Lastly, counselors three and seven believed that the competencies correlate with the ASCA standards for school counselors, but also expressed some concerns in its full execution a lack of time, training, resources, and higher level support:

*COUNSELOR 3: I think that they are in alignment with what ASCA is telling us to do as school counselors. I think the only entity in where we walk a fine line in my personal experience as is school counselor is there is a little bit of entrapment because we are state employees and then the sublevel from a state employee, we have to be in line with what our district says and supports....*

*COUNSELOR 7: I think it is a great thing to strive for. I think it's something that we always need to be looking at. I think it's probably not very possible to do everything as well as we would like on this list with the time and resource constraints that we have....*

Consequently, the review of the literature and as well as the participants' responses align with the various emergent themes such as competence, exposure, collaboration, and resources.

Another study showcased in chapter two was conducted by Johnson, Rochkind, and Ott (2010). The perceptions of former high school students regarding their school counselors was this study's concentration. This article is significant as its focus is on the

role of school counselors assisting with the academic and career develop of all students. The study surveyed young adults, ages 20-30 who had some postsecondary experience regarding the services they received from their high school counselors. The results indicated that 67% of the participants believed that their counselors did a poor or fair job in helping them determine the right school for them, 59% gave their counselors a poor or fair rating on providing assistance in ways to pay for college, 62% of the participants rated their counselor as poor or fair in helping them figure out different types of careers to choose, and 54% believed that their counselor did a poor or fair job in explaining and helping them with the application process. What is interesting and unfortunate is that in this current study, the participants' perceived knowledge regarding their effectiveness in the area of academic and career counseling is somewhat different from the results of the article. For example, when asked the question, what is your role and responsibility in this program, more than half of the participants indicated that preparing students for their postsecondary plans was their main role.

*COUNSELOR 1: I am a junior/senior counselor, so my, I guess biggest role is like I said, academically making sure the students are where they need to be to graduate, but then also making sure that they are prepared for their plans after high school.*

*COUNSELOR 2: Okay, I do IGPs, which is the Individual Graduation Plan, which is a state law. We meet with every student, discuss, their graduation plans, post-secondary plans....*

*COUNSELOR 5: My role's a 10<sup>th</sup> grade counselor. I work with 10<sup>th</sup> grade students and we try to focus on their plans for the next school year and also post-secondary plans.*

*COUNSELOR 6: Okay, so I am a junior and senior counselor. So I send transcripts, I get kids off the college. I promote scholarships. I email scholarship opportunities.*

*COUNSELOR 7: I am also responsible for a large part of the career aspect. Right now, I am responsible for the career fair and any other jobs that come in and may want to provide opportunities for the students whether it be an internship or just a job opportunity. I also make contact with or work with business and the students in getting job shadowing opportunities or just bringing quest speakers in to get them exposed to different things in the world of work.*

### ***Perceptions of Various Roles and Tasks***

Research question number two asks, how high school counselors perceive their roles relating to social justice advocacy. Thus, as mentioned in the previous section, school counselors are expected to be knowledgeable of and perform many different duties and skills. This section takes a look at how school counselors perceive those roles and tasks. Ford and Nelson (2007) completed a qualitative study regarding school counselors' perceptions of their leadership roles. The researchers' goal was to obtain knowledge of the effects that school counselors' expected leadership skills may have had on other staff members in the school setting. The study was based on the New Focus Counselor training initiated by The Education Trust and DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund designed to prepare school counselors to serve as leaders and advocates. The results of the study revealed that four out of five school counselors perceived themselves as leaders, however, their definitions of leadership matched the traditional mode of school counseling and not that of the new vision for school counselors. The authors further explained that the leadership attributes which their participants spoke of reflected

principals' and other administration responsibilities such as testing, scheduling (tradition mode), rather than the new vision of leadership as defined by the Education Trust Transforming School Counseling Initiative. The findings of this research is applicable to this current study because leadership is a component of social justice advocacy as clearly stated in the systems advocacy domain of the ACA advocacy competencies:

Regardless of the specific target of change, the processes for altering the status quo have common qualities. Change is a process that requires vision, persistence, leadership, collaboration, systems analysis, and strong data. In many situations, a counselor is the right person to take leadership (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002, "Systems Advocacy").

However, in reviewing the ACA competencies with the participants of this current study and inquiring as to how they perceived them as fitting into their day-to-day activities, most counselors discussed the collaboration piece, but only one counselor made mention of possible leadership actions:

*COUNSELOR 4: We work with our advisory board that's consisting of community members. We are data driven counseling program and so we are constantly looking for vulnerable groups that lack either access to things...particular outcomes are showing in our data what is causing those outcomes? And is there something we can do as counselors to help with that. As far as systems advocacy, looking at developing programs to implement change, that's something we would do, certainly on a day-to-day.*

In another article regarding school counselors' perceived roles, Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) conducted a quantitative study examining the discrepancies between actual and preferred practice of school counselors. One of the things the researchers were



attempting to determine was if the activities school counselors preferred doing aligned with the comprehensive, developmental school counseling framework. Findings from this study indicated that school counselors consistently reported that they would prefer to be engaged in interventions associated with actually helping students rather than spending time doing activities that are non-guidance related. The researchers deemed that the results confirmed the claim that comprehensive and developmental school counseling programs are a necessity. This study links to the current research that the majority of the participants interviewed perceived their main role as providing comprehensive and developmental services to their students, and the majority described their school counseling program as being comprehensive and developmental in nature. This is evident in some of their comments when asked to describe their current school counseling program:

*COUNSELOR 2: It's based on the ASCA model. We are ASCA, I guess call RAMP certified, and under our current model, we do have comprehensive goals.*

*COUNSELOR 3: So we are an ASCA model school, we are currently not RAMPed though....*

*COUNSELOR 4: We still operate under the RAMP model, so we meet with the principal every year for our management agreement and come up with a curriculum action plan with all of our classroom guidance throughout the year. We do a small group action plan, a closing the achievement gap action plan, and then usually something along the lines of a student needs based on like a needs assessment. And then we also have an advisory board meeting twice a year with parents and community members....*

*COUNSELOR 5: Our current school program, we are a RAMP school which is recognized ASCA model program, and we focus on a lot of personal/social, academic, career with our students. I think we put forth a lot of effort in trying to make the program as comprehensive as possible for our students.*

*COUNSELOR 6: I spend an enormous amount of time with my kids and whether that's socially, emotionally, academically...I am in the hallways, I have kids in here about 80% of my day, so that's what we do...we are here for our kids and our paperwork is second.*

*COUNSELOR 7: I feel like we strive to be a comprehensive counseling program, so we are dealing with all the different domains....I think that overall we are a pretty good model of a comprehensive school counseling program, I think that we work well with one another and we are meeting a lot of needs. I don't see huge groups of children that their needs are going unmet. But as with most counseling programs, I think we are also challenged in that we are not...we don't really have the freedom or the time to do everything as effectively as we might like.*

Additionally, according to the participants, the functioning of a comprehensive and developmental counseling program in most of the high schools in which the participants are employed was noted in their school counseling plan and/or mission statement found on their webpage.

Lastly, one more article that was of interest and importance discussed a study conducted by Bemak and Chung (2008). This research focused on the concept of the nice counselor syndrome (NCS) meaning that school counselors who are viewed as “nice” are comfortable with that image because they prefer to be known as individuals who are advocates for harmony, acceptance, and peace and who avoid and deflect conflict within

the school. From the results of this study, the authors concluded with 16 recommendations based on multicultural/social justice work in schools and on the ACA advocacy competencies. The review of this article is relevant as it addressed possible barriers to school counselors becoming social justice advocates and challenged them to take risks for the purpose of ensuring that all students have the same opportunities and are treated fairly in their schools. As the authors also discussed personal and professional obstacles which may hinder school counselors from moving beyond NCS, this article relates to the current research themes of personal experiences competencies, and exposure. One participant's comments referencing her preparedness to serve as a social justice advocacy resonates this syndrome.

*COUNSELOR 1: I just want to make sure if I do take that, initiative to be a social justice advocate that I like know my facts. I know my research, like I can have two feet to stand on. I don't want it to like kind of make a fuss and consider a situation something that it is really wasn't.*

Another participant share her observation of possible NCS characteristics regarding school counselors discussing postsecondary plans with students.

*COUNSELOR 3: I have witnessed multiple...whatever reason, and it has been I think an individual personality trait, but folks have just been scared I feel...or to have the discussion with the child who has the 1.9 and is failing 3 out of the 4 they need to graduate—you are not graduating. To me, I don't feel like, I am not getting a high for delivering the bad news, but I want to be very realistic with this student.—“Now, if you would like to graduate and that is in your plan, this is what you need to do. This is the plan we will lay out. Now you are probably not marketable for a 4-year college at this*

*point, but you can still get there. You may need to start at the two and transfer"--or what have you. And so, I feel like I have been in situations where folks have tipped-toed around the matter of fact that is most beneficial for the student.*

These are just a few examples indicating how personal experiences, exposure, and level of competency are all major factors in how school counselors perceive the many roles that they are expected to perform.

### **Assumptions**

In designing this study, there were several assumptions. First, it was presumed that qualitative methodology would be the best approach to examine the perceptions of school counselors' regarding their perceived knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role in social justice advocacy. According to Heppner and Heppner (2004), "Qualitative researchers believe that objective reality can never be fully understood or discovered and that there exist many possible ways of looking at realities" (p. 138). Moreover, Rubin & Babbie (2014) postulate that "qualitative research is especially appropriate to the study of those topics for which attitudes and behaviors can be best understood within their natural setting" (p. 471). This assumption was deemed true as during the data collection process, this researcher discovered that engaging in face-to-face interviews and utilizing semi-structured questions provided her with the opportunity to have meaningful dialogue, obtain in-depth and unique responses from each participant and "to acquire data not obtainable in any other way" (Gay, 1996, p. 223).

Secondly, it was assumed that school counselors' perception of their social justice advocacy role directly relates to their self-efficacy in fulfilling this role. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's level of competence in his or her ability to successfully

perform a task (Bandura, 1986). In considering the responses of participants relating to the questions pertaining to their stance on social justice advocacy and their preparedness to serve as a social justice advocate, this assumption was found true in that several of the participants were unclear of their opinions about the issue and the majority of them rated their competency level as moderate to low.

A final assumption was that there is a correlation between students' academic, social/personal, and career development and school counselors' social justice advocacy competence. Trusty and Brown (2005) explained in their article that according to the ASCA National Model:

School counselors' advocacy efforts are aimed at (a) eliminating barriers impeding students' development; (b) creating opportunities to learn for all students; (c) ensuring access to a quality school curriculum; (d) collaborating with others within and outside the school to help students meet their needs; and (e) promoting positive, systemic change in schools (p. 259).

As per the responses collected from the participants, their primary role is to assist in the social/personal, academic, and career development of their students, yet again, the majority of them do not believe that they are competent enough in the area of social justice. Although it is believed that this assumption is true, there is a concern that if school counselors are not fully competent in their ability to serve as social justice advocates, then the social/personal, academic, and career development for all students is not being completely obtained.

## **Scope**

The scope of the study consisted of high school counselors from various high schools in a public school district located in the southeastern area of the United States. Although the scope of this research entails only a small number of participants, counselor education programs, schools, and school districts in other areas may be able to infer the data and make suggestions for their settings as neither this researcher or her coders found any social or cultural-biases in the commentaries of the participants.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of this research included various areas. The first limitation is the subjectivity of information which may have caused difficulty in determining reliability and validity. However, to contain this subjectivity and safeguard reliability, the researcher engaged in reflective journaling (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). Second, there was possible researcher biases. As this researcher was the sole data collector, researcher bias was at hand and should be noted. The researcher is a practicing high school counselor and believes that high school counselors' perceptions of social justice advocacy is an important topic of discussion. Because of her passion for this subject matter, she frequently engaged in deep thoughts concerning her own views of this phenomenon as well as her performance regarding the needs of all of her students. As the director of her school counseling program which is an ASCA recognized program model, she reflected on the implementation of her program and her counseling team. She also spent time answering the questions in which she posed in this study. Acknowledging these thoughts as well as employing additional coders and member checks helped to suppress her biases and gave credibility to this study. Third, there was a concern for a

lack of research skills on the part of the sole researcher. However, completing several research courses, being a member of the group being studied, participating in prolonged engagements, and employing qualified coders all aided in reducing this inadequacy. Fourth, there were issues of anonymity and confidentiality, however, numbers were randomly assigned for each participant immediately after the interviews were conducted prior to sharing the transcriptions with the coders. Also, no identifiable information was disclosed in the research. Both of these strategies assisted to reduce this area of concern. Sixth, there was an apprehension that this researcher's presence during interviews may affect participants' responses, thus every effort was made to ease participants' minds regarding the purpose of the research, and to establish a positive rapport prior to launching into the interview questions (Gay, 1996; Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Lastly, with interviews, there was a concern for social desirability bias. As explained by Rubin and Babbie (2014) this term implies that there is a tendency for participants "to answer questions in ways that convey a favorable impression of oneself" (p. 214). Thus is an effort to minimize this apprehension, the researcher put forth a great effort to mask her own subtle biases by limiting smiles or head nods when the participants' comments supported her beliefs.

## **Significance of the Study**

### ***Knowledge Generation***

Within the past two decades, there has been a great undertaking of educational and counseling organizations to include school counselors in the movement of addressing the ever existing educational inequities in U.S. school systems. These organizations have imposed various mandates, competencies, and training initiatives for school counselors in

an effort to transform the school counseling role from its traditional reactive stance to wider social justice advocacy focus designed to meet the academic, career, social/personal needs of all students. However, despite the abundance of literature emphasizing this essential role of advocacy, as well as the programs which have been put in place, little has been said about how this role is understood and/or viewed by school counselors. From this study, the researcher was able to gain insight into of the perceived knowledge of school counselors regarding the ACA advocacy competencies as well as their roles as advocates for social justice. It was discovered that while the participants were well aware of the ASCA national model expectations, their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their exact role in social justice advocacy was limited. Moreover, this research provided insight regarding the need for training in social justice advocacy, multicultural diversity, and more to increase the competency level of school counselors to ensure their ability to assist all students with their personal/social, academic, and career development.

### ***Professional Application***

Despite the vast attempts made to include school counselors in the movement of ensuring equity and a high standard of education for all students, school counselors are still faced with challenges that prevent efficiency in this role of advocacy. Likewise, there appears to be little or no discussion as to which areas of school counseling (training, school leadership, self-efficacy, and more.) pose the greatest obstacles. The findings of this study are essential because they present first-hand information concerning school counselors' insights about social justice advocacy. Moreover, they provide suggestions for all stakeholders (counselor educators, school counselors, and school and district



leaders) to play a part in helping social justice advocacy to become common place for all school counselors.

*Implications for Counselor Educators:* The understandings gained from this study could be used to help counselor educators develop new programs as well as revise current ones. The eight reported themes (personal experiences, competence, exposure, diverse populations, programs, collaboration in the schools, community collaboration/resources, and advocacy) in this study should be considered when creating courses for programs, also when developing activities, projects, and assignments within individual classes. When participants of this study were asked about the graduate school training, most indicated that the one or two courses they received in multiculturalism simply was not enough. Suggestions they made regarding possible course work included additional classes on the subject of cultural diversity, more engaging immersion activities, lessons about the ACA advocacy competencies, exposure to real life school issues (i.e. diverse populations-LGBT, ESOL, and special education.; social issues-teen violence, depression, and eating disorders), relevant school counseling case studies and role-playing exercises, interpreting data and having a multicultural infused program in which all courses within the curriculum entail a component of this area.

One example of how such teachings could be employed is by incorporating a constructivist approach called the Liberation model (Steele, 2008). It is based on Paulo Freire's teaching of problem-based education and was specifically designed to teach social justice advocacy in core counseling courses. It consists of four phases which allows students to utilize their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Within the phases, the students are expected to; 1) examine the implicit and explicit political and

cultural ideologies of the U.S.; 2) examine the implicit and explicit political and cultural ideologies of counseling; 3) engage in an interdisciplinary study of the first two phases, and 4) develop an action plan. This method would entail; a) counselor educators conducting lessons on various multicultural and social justice issues, as well as CACREP, ACA, and ASCA mandates and standards for counselors to become social justice advocates, b) grouping students to determine themes from the information they received from the lectures and research those themes via social media, interview, etc., and c) developing action plans for assisting those affected by the issues. The process and evaluation of this project would consist of students' participation in classroom dialogue, journal writing, interviews, group work, research, report writing, and oral presentations.

Additionally, this concept could also be addressed within the practicum and internship experiences. One counselor suggested the possibility of counselor educators having their students conduct research on unfamiliar school settings in which they would be placed. This would allow the school counselors in training to have an opportunity to connect with environments that are outside of their reality.

*Implications for school counselors:* First, practicing school counselors can consider the findings of the research to gain an understanding of the importance of taking it upon themselves to self-educate and remain abreast of the issues which affect the profession of school counseling. With the development of ASCA's RAMP award, more counselors are aware of their role in assisting with the social/personal, academic, and career development of all students, however, it is vital that they also understand how this relates to social justice advocacy and the ACA advocacy competencies.

Secondly, school counselors can use the eight emergent themes to research or advocate for professional development as it relates to the most appropriate training for them. Doing so could assist them in gaining the necessary skills to perform the various strategies within the ACA advocacy competencies such; a) as identifying barriers of vulnerable students and student groups, and developing an action plan for confronting those barriers, b) providing and interpreting data to show the urgency for change, c) preparing written and multi-media materials that provide clear explanations of the roles of specific environmental factors in human development, d) seeking out and joining with potential allies and more (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002). Once school counselors increase their self-efficacy and competencies in these areas, they will more than likely feel more comfortable in communicating the importance of the advocacy role and their needs with their school leaders/district.

Third, as understanding and using data is a key element in addressing the social/personal, academic, and career needs of all students, all high school counselors should seek professional development in this area, if needed, and use the data in creating programs as well as developing and implementing their yearly goals.

Furthermore, although all of the school counseling programs in which the participants are employed have mission statements which express the importance of providing services to all students (may indicate an intention of social justice advocacy) and that six out of the eight participants' school counseling programs are RAMP (Recognized ASCA Program Model), the majority of the programs did not have their school counseling comprehensive program plan visually displayed. Thus, another proposition for high school counselors is to showcase their programs (via webpages,

brochures, life size calendars, bulletin boards, etc.). This form of public relations assists the other stakeholders (parents, teachers, administration, district office personnel, board members, and the community) in understanding school counselors' role and purpose and can also aid in them receiving the support that is essential in this social justice advocacy movement.

*Implications for school leaders/districts:* One of the main responsibilities for school and district leaders is to determine the most appropriate and effective utilization of its school faculty (Lieberman, 2004), thus it is important for those individuals “to be cognizant of the roles and functions of the school counselors in order to make appropriate and informed decisions” (Zalaquett, & Chatters, 2012, p. 90). Therefore, the information stemming from this study can be used by school and district leaders to gain an awareness of school counselors' roles. This understanding could assist these individuals in identifying applicable tasks which would “move school counselors from an ancillary service oriented profession to one that becomes a critical player in accomplishing the mission of schools, academic success and high achievement for all students” (Martin, 2002, p. 152). In addition, school leaders and administrators could also draw on the eight emergent themes to establish appropriate professional development for school counselors. Ideally, the workshops/trainings should be consistent (i.e. renewed each year), to allow for ongoing learning.

Furthermore, in an effort to ensure the implementation of the implications, it is strongly suggested that all school districts employ a school counseling coordinator. Such an individual is necessary in the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs and the development of social justice advocacy for all students. As these

undertakings require a collaboration of well-trained and highly competent school counselors, the advantages of having a district level school counseling coordinator includes: a) assistance in hiring highly qualified school counselors; b) providing appropriate professional development, consultation and supervision; c) ensuring that school counselors are evaluated in relationship to the professional competencies as outlined by the ASCA National Model; d) providing necessary and consistent leadership across all educational settings; and e) promoting and coordinating the overall design, delivery, evaluation and improvement of comprehensive school counseling programs in a systematic manner (ASCA, 2010). From the findings of this research, it was noted that although all high school counseling programs surveyed are in need of improvement in the area of social justice advocacy, the districts in which a school counseling coordinator is employed, the participants spoke more about on-going professional development, frequent collaboration with other school counseling departments within their districts, and programs addressing the needs of their marginalized students.

Consequently, school counseling district coordinators throughout this state should connect with the school counseling representative at the state level to assist in the development of an updated comprehensive model which is in alliance with the current ASCA program model. A best practice would be to create a steering committee to allow school counseling leaders from various districts along with the state representative to meet regularly, conduct research, and participate in on-going professional development as it relates to the role of school counselors.

Lastly, in regards to all educational investors, one implication to consider across the board could be to form collaborative relationships and create opportunities for both

future and present school counselors and school administrators to engage in cross-discipline graduate courses and professional development.

### ***Social Change***

Knowledge acquired from this study has the potential assist counselor educators, school counselors, and school/district leaders in obtaining a better understanding of the needs of school counselors in regards to social justice advocacy. This researcher obtained commentary from practicing school counselors and allowed them the opportunity to express their beliefs regarding this role. The data retrieved from this research has shed light on possible factors which facilitate as well as hinder school counselors' abilities to serve in their advocacy role effectively. If school counselors are given the opportunity to gain an awareness and competency in social justice advocacy, it is believed that their level of self-efficacy will increase. This boosted level of self-efficacy could in turn produce school counselors who are committed to honorably serving in their role of social justice advocates. As a result, school counselors could finally answer the call of ensuring that all students do, indeed, receive a just and quality education regardless of race, gender, abilities, and income, and are equipped with the tools necessary to be college and/or career ready upon graduation.

### **Future Research**

Based on the discussion of the results of this study, the researcher was able to identify other possible research suggestions.

First, in reflecting on the wording of the research question, what are school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies, this researcher presumed that the participants would be familiar with the competencies,

thus hoping to obtain a full understanding of all of the participants' views regarding their knowledge about the competencies. However, as some of the participants had no knowledge of them, revisiting the wording of this question could be considered in future research. Additionally, since some participants were not aware of the competencies, a quantitative method using a standardized measure could be conducted to determine school counselors' level of knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies.

Second, this research explored the concept of the ACA advocacy competencies and social justice advocacy in regards to school counselors' perceptions; however it would be helpful to conduct a qualitative study on counselor educators to obtain their opinions in its corporation in pre-service training.

Third, concluding a qualitative study on school and district leaders could also provide additional information and prove to be beneficial in the understanding of this phenomenon.

Fourth, as the literature (Sears, 1999; Wilkerson & Eschbach, 2009; Evans et al, 2011) as well as several participants indicated barriers, such as lack of knowledge and skills, expected involvement in non-counselor related tasks, lack of support, low competency level and more, impede school counselors from becoming effective social justice advocates, a qualitative study on school and district leaders could also provide additional information and prove to be beneficial in the understanding of this phenomenon.

Fifth, out of the 138 high school counselors who received an email invitation to participate in this study, only eight responded with interest, thus it may be a good idea to repeat this study offering an incentive or seeking the school districts' counseling

coordinators assistance in facilitating the dissemination of the request for participants as a request coming from an authority figure rather than a peer, may increase the number of responses. Although the sample size was sufficient for this type of study, it consisted only of females. Thus, it is possible that if there were more diverse participants, this could allow for additional data to be collected and different results could have transpired.

Sixth, this study was designed to survey only high school counselors, but given the realization that the role of the school counselor varies within different educational settings, additional research could be considered for elementary and middle school counselors as well.

Lastly, although it is expected that school counselors serve as social justice advocates and the ACA advocacy competencies were created to explain what advocacy looks like on a day-to-day basis for counselors, there is no literature on how these actual advocacy skills are developed within school counselors. Therefore, suggested research (i.e. grounded theory on how school counselors develop into advocates is needed in this area.

### **Personal Reflection**

The research topic of social justice advocacy as it relates to school counselors was chosen because of my 16 years of experience in school counseling, my belief in fairness and equality, and my credence that all children can learn and should be given the appropriate opportunities to help them succeed. In trying to determine exactly what my research topic would be, I was reminded of a conversation during one of my school counseling department meetings a few years ago. At that meeting, the administration team was present and was sharing ACT results and discussing ways in which they wanted



school counselors' assistance in increasing our students' AP (Advanced Placement) enrollment. During the meeting, one of the assistant principals asked what are school counselors currently doing to assist in closing the achievement gap, then one of the counselors responded by saying that we don't really look at things like that (singling students out) because our job is to be here for all students. Although, I understood the premise of what she was trying to say, her comment did not come across as positive in the eyes of our administration, nor did it sit right with me. It was this comment, along with the immersion activities assigned in my EDCE 820 Advanced Transcultural Counseling class that led me to ponder about the ways in which high school counselors provide services and how we conduct our day-to-day activities to ensure that we are indeed meeting the needs of all of our students.

Going into this research, I had already developed certain biases which included: a) a vast majority of school counselors are unaware of the call for them to serve as social justice advocates, b) for those who do, there is reluctance on their part due to their lack of understanding of this role (i.e., the responsibilities and activities it involves), c) school counselors lack of competency deters them from carrying the role of social justice advocacy efficiently, and/or c) school counselors' rigid beliefs about groups of individuals also hinders their effectiveness in this role. Thus, during this entire process, I examined these biases via the use of field notes and a journal used to record thoughts, reactions, and reflections.

It is interesting to note however that after hearing the voices of the eight participants, I discovered that the findings of this research supported most of my preconceptions. Based on the commentaries, the only bias in which the results were

unable to confirm was that school counselors' own rigid beliefs about groups of individuals kept them from being true social justice advocates. Conversely, I am not sure if I asked the right questions to address this bias or if the participants simply did not feel comfortable disclosing their beliefs regarding possible stereotypes. Regardless, I did not get a sense that this notion was an issue as most of the participants indicated that perhaps their lack of knowledge regarding the social justice advocacy phenomenon was because they treat all their students the same. As a result, I was not able to determine if this bias is true, and if so how to resolve it. I do believe, however, that in order for school counselors to become true social justice advocates for all students, we must understand that justice is not necessarily about equality, and that we really must find effective ways to provide differentiated services to meet the diverse needs of our all students.

My desire to conduct this research in the manner that I did was because I truly wanted to talk face-to-face with other high school counselors. I developed a great appreciation for the phenomenological approach of research because it allowed me to obtain first-hand knowledge of the participants' stance regarding their roles in this phenomenon. The opportunity to hear from my peers within the tri-county area in which I am employed was quite an interesting and thought-provoking experience. The participants delivered a wealth of information (both directly and indirectly) regarding their views of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role as social justice advocates. This information was beneficial in determining the needs of school counselors in an effort to make strides to include these educators in the movement of achievement for all students.

Overall, I believe the process went well, but initially I was quite apprehensive awaiting the approval from the three school districts and then waiting to receive responses from my fellow high school counselors regarding their desire to participate. Moreover, I was somewhat disappointed that I only received eight replies of interest out of the 138 email messages that I sent, however I was not surprised. Due to the nature of high school counselors' responsibilities, oftentimes they are encumbered with a great deal of tasks thus may have the tendency to overlook emails that may appear not to pertain to them. If I had to do it again, I would probably offer an incentive or seek the school districts' counseling coordinators assistance in facilitating the dissemination of the request for participants as a means of obtaining a more diverse sampling of participants.

However, the individuals who volunteered to participate generously gave their time and freely answered all of the interview questions (even though there were moments when some of them appeared uncertain of their responses). I believe participation in this research allowed them the opportunity to reflect on areas of their job responsibilities in ways that they may not have done before. Hence, I am very appreciative of their boldness to engage in this research and their desire and willingness to assist in me in my journey.

## **Summary**

Chapter one provided an overview of this study which examined the social justice advocacy mandates and initiatives for school counselors, the ACA advocacy competencies, the evolution of school counselors' roles, conflicting messages from the literature, and the rationale for more research in this area. The chapter showcased various literature indicating the dire need for social justice advocacy in education and the

importance of school counselors' participation in this movement. Despite national counseling and educational organizations' appeal for school counselors to implement social justice practices in their work and to serve as advocates for all students, limited research has been conducted on their perceptions and knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies or their social justice advocacy role. Chapter one explained that this research will entail qualitative-phenomenological research methodology to allow practicing school counselors' voices to be heard. In chapter two, a review of the literature was conducted on various aspects of school counseling. The purpose of this review was to obtain evidence from relevant previous professional literature to create direction for this study.

In chapter three, the researcher delivered the "how" of this study: providing an introduction of how the qualitative methodology was derived from the issue statement, describing the various paradigms of this methodology and justifying the choice of phenomenological research, discussing the role and characteristics of the researcher, highlighting the proposed interview questions, describing and justifying the procedures to gain access to the participants and establishing the relationship between researcher and participant, discussing the measures for ethical protection of the participants which will be put into place, discussing the participants' criteria and justification of numbers, and lastly, describing in detail the method of data collection and analysis.

In chapter four, a summary of the analysis was presented and the findings of interviews conducted with eight high school counselors were portrayed in eight themes. These themes were personal experiences, competence, exposure, diverse populations, programs, collaboration in the schools, community collaboration/resources, and

advocacy. This chapter also provided supporting quotes which were obtained from the participants' interpretations.

The purpose of chapter five was to refer back to the significances of this study mentioned in chapter one. The researcher also discussed implications for counselor educators, school counselors, and school and district leaders. Additionally, the intent was to show a linkage between previous literature and this study's findings. The researcher made certain to include all articles in chapter two used to support this study. Moreover, the researcher discussed assumptions and limitations and provided considerations for future research. Lastly, the researcher shared her personal reflection.

The underlying principle for conducting this study was to explore high school counselors' perceptions regarding their knowledge of the ACA advocacy competencies and their role in social justice advocacy. As previously expressed, the significance of this study sought to deliver new information to obtain a better understanding of school counselors' expected roles as social justice advocates and to determine the most appropriate means to assist in this cause. The importance of preparing school counselors to become effective social justice advocates is necessary in the educational scheme's attempt to address the systemic injustices within our schools today.

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## APPENDIX A – CONSENT LETTER



Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Leonis S. Wright and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my Ph.D. degree in Counselor Education and Supervision, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying social justice advocacy in schools and I am interested in obtaining the views of practicing high school counselors regarding this phenomenon. I am seeking individuals who are currently employed in a diverse high school setting -- a) representing all educational levels (i.e. special education and general education), b) consisting of at least three different ethnicities, and c) having at least ¼ of their students on free and reduced lunch. It is my hope that your contribution will produce results which will have potential implications for counselor training programs, counselor educators, and school districts on how best to prepare future school counselors in the role of advocacy. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and take part in a face-to-face interview. Additionally, if available, I will request that you provide a copy of your department's comprehensive school counseling program plan as well as a copy of your annual evaluation goal.

In regards to the interview, I will ask you questions about your role as a high school counselor, particularly as it relates to working with your marginalized students. The interview will take place at your school or a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will be destroyed once I have transcribed and analyzed them.

Taking part in the study is voluntary. Also, if you initially decide to participate, but later change your mind, that is perfectly fine. Moreover, if you do partake, but during the interview feel uncomfortable with answering all the questions, you do not have to. In either situation, you will not be penalized.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings; however your name, nor the name of your district will not be revealed. Please note that your school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research, however the results may also be shared with your district per their request.

If you have any study related questions or problems, my faculty advisor, Dr. Joshua Gold and I will be happy to speak with you. You may contact me at (843)709-8649 or [lswright@email.sc.edu](mailto:lswright@email.sc.edu) or Dr. Gold at (843) 777-1936 or [JOSGOLD@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:JOSGOLD@mailbox.sc.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you fit the above criteria and are interested in sharing your knowledge and perspectives, please contact me at the number or email address indicated to discuss your participation.

With kind regards,

Leonis S. Wright  
USC College of Education  
(843) 709-8649  
[lswright@email.sc.edu](mailto:lswright@email.sc.edu)

## APPENDIX B – INFORMED CONSENT



### Informed Consent

**Title of Research:** Understanding the call of social justice advocacy: A  
phenomenological study of high school counselors.

**Name of Principal Investigator:**  Leonis S.Wright

**School:** University of South Carolina

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Leonis S. Wright from the University of South Carolina. I understand that the project is designed to obtain information about my perceptions regarding social justice advocacy for all students. I will be one of approximately six high school counselors being interviewed for this research.

- My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
- I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
- I understand that participation involves being interviewed by the researcher from University of South Carolina, and that the interview will last approximately 45 minutes-one hour. Additionally, the interview will be audiotaped and notes will be taken during the interview.

- I understand, I will also be asked to provide a copy of my department's comprehensive school counseling program plan as well as a copy of my annual evaluation goal.
- I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
- I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Research at the University of South Carolina and if I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I may contact the university's Office of Research Compliance at (803) 777-7095.
- I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I have been given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For further information, please contact:

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