PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY:
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR ALL STUDENTS

by

GAYLE AGAN-CHMIELEWSKI DUPRE

(Under the Direction of Pamela O. Paisley)

ABSTRACT

This convergent parallel mixed methods study examined the relationship between professional school counselors’ definitions of social justice advocacy, perceptions about advocacy actions, knowledge and skills related to social justice advocacy, and perceptions of advocacy obligations. In addition, the study investigated the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering demographic factors. This study also sought to determine those factors that are most influential in shaping the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors and explored the phenomenon of social justice advocacy and the experiences of professional school counselors related to social justice advocacy.

Using a random sample of professional school counselors who were members of the American School Counseling Association, the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) measured the perceptions professional school counselors have about social justice advocacy for students and their families. Concurrently, the study used open-ended questions to explore the perceptions professional school counselors have about social justice advocacy for students.
Counselor definitions of social justice advocacy in the school counseling profession and their means of operationalizing social justice advocacy were also explored.

The quantitative methodology for the study included Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, multiple regressions, independent t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance. Statistical significance was found in the mean scores of professional school counselors who self-identified as social justice advocates versus those who did not. Professional school counselors who reported having taken a course in which understanding social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy was the main objective scored significantly higher than those who did not take such a course. Statistical significance was also found in the scores of professional school counselors who self-identified as African American as compared to those self-identifying as Caucasian or Hispanic.

The qualitative methodology for the study employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the meanings the participants attached to their perceptions of social justice advocacy. Themes of awareness, equity, access, resources, empowerment, leadership, fear, lack of resources, and lack of awareness were identified in the qualitative findings. Finally, implications for school districts, professional school counselors, counselor educator programs, and future research are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Advocate, Advocacy, Convergent parallel mixed methods, Counselor educator programs, Equality, Equity, Professional school counselors, Social justice, Social justice advocate
PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY: CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR ALL STUDENTS

by

GAYLE AGAN-CHMIELEWSKI DUPRE

B.S., Georgia State University, 1981
M.Ed., Georgia State University, 1985

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011
© 2011

Gayle Agan-Chmielewski DuPre

All Rights Reserved
PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY:  
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR ALL STUDENTS

by

GAYLE AGAN–CHMIELEWSKI DUPRE

Major Professor: Pamela O. Paisley 
Committee: Diane L. Cooper 
Anneliese A. Singh

Electronic Version Approved: 
Maureen Grasso 
Dean of the Graduate School 
The University of Georgia 
May 2011
DEDICATION

To my Mother and Daddy, Shirley Marie Daniell Agan and Max Norman Agan: Home is where our journey begins and I could have never done this without you. You believed in me and taught me to believe in myself. To my Mother, who knew I would take this journey long before I ever considered it: You loved me enough to let me do it my way and I am forever grateful. You taught me to believe, to have faith, and how being loved makes you real. You listened patiently as I tried to balance my life and this dissertation. To my Daddy, who believed I could do anything: I cherish our memories and I miss you.

To my children, Justin and Connor Chmielewski: You are the best part of my life. I never knew how much I could love until you came into my life. I am proud to be your mother and proud of the young men you are today. Without you, this would not have been possible. Your love and your hugs carried me through the fleeting moments of doubt and discouragement. Of all the blessings in my life, you are the greatest.

To my maternal grandmother, Zona May “Mommy” Daniell: You were the epitome of love in my eyes and you showed me the importance of advocacy long before I knew where my journey would lead me.

In the words of Stephen Schwartz (2003), “So much of me is made of what I learned from you. You'll be with me like a handprint on my heart. And now whatever way our stories end, I know you have re-written mine . . . because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Mother and Daddy for their unconditional love, understanding, and encouragement. Mother, you were my first teacher and you taught me to love learning. You inspire me to be my best and to continue to reach for the brass ring. Daddy, I wish you were here to share this, but there has never been any doubt that you were proud of me. You both believed in me and I love you and thank you for all you did to make this possible.

Thank you to Justin and Connor for your support, your encouragement, and most of all your love. You are amazing young men! When I needed to stay home and study, read, or write, you gave me the time and space I needed and never complained. Even though my being a student when you were both in college created a paradigm shift for each of us, together we made it work! You are the best and I’ll always love you. May the journey you choose in life bring you as much joy as you have given me.

To Donna: Thank you for always being there. For listening, for the road trips to Hilton Head, the much needed breaks, and most of all the laughter. I am blessed that you are my sister and my best friend.

To Brittany, Teddy, and Travis: Thank you for sharing your Mom with me and for being a very special part of my life. I love you and I am so proud of you.

To the Counseling Department at Kell High School (2005–2010): Thank you for encouraging me to do this, then cheering me on and believing in me when I found myself in uncharted territory.
To all of my girlfriends, I appreciate you more than you know. My contact with you during this process was a source of love and of strength. Especially to Carla, who has seen me through a lifetime of adventures, thank you for being my best friend.

I am forever grateful to my dissertation committee. To Dr. Paisley, my chair: You taught me, nurtured me, encouraged me, cheered for me, cared for me, listened to me, and reminded me how blessed I am each step of the way. Thank you for being you. Dr. Cooper, thank you for believing in me and keeping me on track, and for your patience and willingness to help me each step of the way. Dr. Singh, thank you for teaching me the importance of qualitative research and what it brings to our profession. Dr. Wilson, although you were not a part of my committee I thank you for encouraging me and helping me find my voice. I thank each of you for teaching me to question everything—even those things I’ve believed to be true my entire life. I am forever changed because of you.

To my former teachers at Austell Elementary, Floyd Junior High, and South Cobb High School, thank you for a solid foundation upon which I could build for a lifetime.

To the members of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) who participated in my study, thank you for your feedback and for giving your time to assist with my research.

To all those who have gone before me and paved the way for me . . . To all who have generously touched my life. . . To my family and friends who have loved me, encouraged me, supported me, and never given up on me . . . I count you among my many blessings and thank you for your part in my journey!
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................v

LIST OF TABLES .....................................................................................................................x

LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................xi

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .....................................................................................................................1
   Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................................2
   Statement of the Problem .........................................................................................................3
   Research Questions ................................................................................................................6
   Significance of the Study .........................................................................................................6
   Theoretical Perspective ...........................................................................................................8
   Delimitations ..........................................................................................................................12
   Definition of Terms ...............................................................................................................12

2 SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .................................................................13
   Advocacy ...............................................................................................................................13
   Social Justice .........................................................................................................................15
   Significance of Social Justice Advocacy in School Counseling ..........................................18
   Impact of Education Reform and Current Counseling Initiatives .....................................20
   Social Justice Advocacy Beliefs, Attitudes, Perceptions, and Actions ..................................27
   Conclusion ............................................................................................................................37

3 METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................39
   The Role of the Researcher .....................................................................................................40
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 FINDINGS</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of the Sample</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Screening</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Results</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 DISCUSSION</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Study</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Quantitative Findings</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Qualitative Findings</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications of Findings</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDICES

A  American Counselor Association Advocacy Competencies ........ 108
B  Introductory Letter ............................................................ 109
C  Informed Consent Letter ...................................................... 111
D  Demographic Questionnaire .................................................. 112
E  School Counseling Survey .................................................... 114
F  Open-ended Questions .......................................................... 117
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample........................................56
Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix among School Counseling Survey Scores ..........58
Table 3: Summary of ANOVA on Average Score by Ethnicity..............................61
Table 4: ANOVA for the Regression of Factors Influencing Social Justice Advocacy...63
Table 5: Mean Scores for School Counseling Survey ...........................................77
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1: Convergent Parallel Design</th>
<th>42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The future success of students and education reform depends upon professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates. As the achievement and opportunity gaps widen between majority students and their marginalized counterparts, professional school counselors must redefine their roles in the schools (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007) and take action to remove the oppressive barriers that prevent marginalized students from reaching their intellectual, social, or emotional potential. The American Counseling Association (ACA) advocacy competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002), The Education Trust’s Transforming School Counseling Initiative (The Education Trust, 2001), and the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model (2003, 2005) require that social justice advocacy become an integral part of every school counseling program. Moving beyond the role of peacemaker in the school (Bemak & Chung, 2008) to that of proactive change agent is a daunting task. However, every student is entitled to a fair and just education, and professional school counselors must have the training and skills to be a voice and a change agent for those who are marginalized and oppressed.

While the school counseling profession began with a focus on the vocational movement and an emphasis on career development and character building, counselors today must consider the intellectual, social, and emotional development of students. The narrow focus of the past is no longer adequate to provide our students with the
competencies necessary for a successful future. Although there is a national movement encouraging counselors to act as social justice advocates for students (ASCA, 2003, 2005; Lewis et al., 2002; The Education Trust, 2001), counselors need the knowledge and skills to incorporate this role into their daily practice. Only by addressing educational inequities through social justice advocacy efforts will professional school counselors prepare all students for the ever-changing world and provide them with the opportunities to reach their potential. Through the efforts of professional school counselors, the oppressive barriers that impede the intellectual, social, or emotional development of students can be eliminated and all students will have access to a quality education (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between professional school counselors’ definitions of social justice advocacy, perceptions about advocacy actions, knowledge and skills related to social justice advocacy, and perceptions of their own advocacy obligations. In addition, the study investigated the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering factors such as gender, identity as a social justice advocate, school level, years of experience in school counseling, school setting, size of school, diversity of school setting, and social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy training. This study also sought to determine those factors that are most influential in shaping the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school
counselors. Last, the study explored the phenomenon of social justice advocacy and the experiences of professional school counselors related to social justice advocacy.

In this study, the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) measured professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy for students and their families. Concurrently, the study utilized open-ended questions to explore professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy for students. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data allowed the researcher to explore the problem from multiple perspectives and use strengths from both approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The quantitative methodology included Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (PPMCC), multiple regressions, independent t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The qualitative methodology was conducted using a phenomenological approach to investigate the meanings the participants attached to their perceptions of social justice advocacy for students and their families.

**Statement of the Problem**

Regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, every child has the ability to succeed in school and in life. Yet students drop out of school at alarming rates in spite of the efforts of educators, parents, and politicians (Orfield, 2004). Retention and success of students who are at risk for failure are two of the greatest challenges professional school counselors face today (Edmondson & White, 1998). Students report that a lack of connectedness to school, academic challenges, and real-world obstacles are primary reasons they choose to drop out of school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).
Because dominant cultural values shape the educational success and failure of students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007), marginalized students and those affected by oppressive barriers face more challenges in the education system and are more likely to drop out than White middle- or upper-class students. For many years, educators have tried to alleviate the achievement and opportunity gaps between students of the dominant culture and those marginalized and oppressed by factors such as heredity, ethnicity, gender, religion, values, intelligence, and work ethic. However, the professional school counselor’s role as a social justice advocate has often been overlooked in these efforts. Until this key component is included in reform, it is likely the achievement and opportunity gaps will continue to grow.

During the past two decades, individuals, schools, school districts, and the federal government have attempted to redesign schools to close the achievement and opportunity gaps for youth through programs such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002), adequate yearly progress, career academies, rigorous coursework, small learning communities, and a variety of transition programs. While all of these programs have shown merit and promise, none has considered the role of professional school counselors in closing the achievement gap. The intense focus on classroom methods and processes has caused educators to disregard the ability of professional school counselors to identify and eliminate intellectual, emotional, social, and psychological barriers that inhibit student success.

This oversight has caused educators to continue to treat the symptoms rather than the problem in many instances. Students struggling in school often do not need skill building or remediation; instead, it is the student’s emotional and social development that
requires attention. “We have found in our research that often kids who fail in math don’t need more math. They need the ability to concentrate on the math they’re getting. They’re impeded by emotional blockage” (Sleek, 1997, p. 1).

The challenges faced by educators today are unlike those of the past. Calls to help all children achieve to their intellectual potential have brought the education needs of all students into focus for educators in the United States. The 21st century has brought about accountability measures that enforce the collection and use of data to determine best practices (NCLB, 2002). Although the importance of social justice advocacy in school counseling has been established (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008) and the need for empirical research determined (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005), there is a glaring absence of literature and research when it comes to social justice advocacy skills and behaviors (Field & Baker, 2004).

Professional school counselors must not only believe in the success of every student regardless of their past or current disposition; they must also have the knowledge and skills necessary to bring about change (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Professional school counselors must stop relying on theories and interventions without regard for the cultural backgrounds of the students and implement practices that emphasize the socio-cultural and environmental factors that influence student performance and behavior (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Unless and until this challenge is accepted and professional school counselors become change agents at all levels for students, the achievement and opportunity gaps will continue to grow and marginalized students will continue to fail to reach their academic potential.
Research Questions

RQ1: What is the relationship between the way professional school counselors define social justice advocacy, their perceptions about advocacy actions, their knowledge and skills related to social justice advocacy, and their perceptions of advocacy obligations?

RQ2: What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering factors such as school level, years of experience in school counseling, school setting, and social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy training?

RQ3: What factors are most influential in shaping the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors?

RQ4: What are professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy in their work?

Significance of the Study

Although the call for counselors to become social justice advocates permeates the professional literature, the majority of research is theoretical. When it comes to essential advocacy behaviors of professional school counselors, the literature and empirical research is sparse (Field & Baker, 2004). There is also a need for assessment tools to evaluate counselor awareness, knowledge, and skills related to social justice counseling advocacy efforts as well as the need for research regarding perceived advocacy competence in counselors (Green, McCollum, & Hays, 2008, p. 26). While an abundance of literature confirms the need for professional school counselors to become social justice advocates at all levels, “specifics of operationalizing counselor advocacy
suggests that school counselors may not possess an awareness of the benefits of advocacy, particularly on the overall school climate” (Field & Baker, 2004, p. 58). Additionally, research on the knowledge and skills necessary to advocate for individuals, groups, social-cultural issues, or communities, and research on the skills needed when conducting advocacy in the public arena, are lacking in the field (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Steele, 2008).

Understanding the reasons professional school counselors resist the change from service-driven counseling programs to a standards-based model of counseling that requires them to become social justice advocates will allow counselor education programs, national organizations, school districts, and local schools to provide the necessary social justice advocacy training and education. This understanding will also promote social justice advocacy awareness, knowledge, and skills in the school counseling profession. Although the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) and the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) National Model (2003, 2005) have been in existence for many years, the resistance to change is apparent among numerous counselors who continue to find comfort in their current role in the school. There is no doubt that the time for change is now and until change occurs, we will continue to lose students in our schools daily due to a lack of access and equity in our current system.

Professional school counselors are uniquely qualified to impact large numbers of students, parents, teachers, and communities. It is important that they thoroughly understand social justice advocacy and acquire the skills to advocate at all levels for students who are marginalized, oppressed, underserved, or underrepresented.
Professional school counselors who have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to become social justice advocates and are willing and able to act appropriately will lead the nation as we move toward a new understanding of justice for all.

Theoretical Perspective

Empowerment theory and relational-cultural theory (RCT) provide the theoretical frameworks for this convergent parallel mixed methods research study. Professional school counselors working to address the achievement and opportunity gaps in the American educational system must adhere to a theoretical approach to practice that empowers students from marginalized communities (Lee, 2001) and promotes healthy, growth-producing relationships.

Rooted in feminist and multicultural theory, empowerment theory is described by Gutierrez (1995) as "the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (p. 229). Relational-cultural theory builds upon and expands the work of Carl Rogers to focus on the connectedness that is essential to the psychological development and emotional well-being of individuals. This comprehensive theory complements the multicultural/social justice movement by examining how oppression encumbers the relational development of marginalized people across the life span (Comstock et al., 2008). The use of these theories in this mixed methods study informs the purpose of the study and the questions presented.

Empowerment Theory

Mitcham-Smith (2007) states that, “applying empowerment theory to the role of professional school counselors and a comprehensive, multicultural school guidance
program offers hope for better serving some of our country’s most marginalized and oppressed students” (p. 341). Through the personal empowerment of students and a focus on strengths rather than deficits, professional school counselors have the ability to liberate students of marginalized communities.

Recognizing the oppressive barriers that create obstacles to personal and academic success, professional school counselors can foster empowerment through the relationships they create with students. While the relationship is crucial, it is also necessary for students to understand empowerment in their own way. Focusing on a strengths and resiliency model, professional school counselors must value wellness over illness and competence over deficiency (Lee, 2001). Counselors must believe in students’ abilities regardless of their background, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other factor that perpetuates oppression; they must operate from the standpoint that all students are capable of reaching their potential and personal goals. Using empowerment theory, social justice advocates can assist students in acquiring the confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to achieve in school and in life.

Encouraging and providing resources for students to participate in school or community-based groups can also build self-confidence and encourage healthy relationships with others. Group participation also provides a forum for oppressed people to share their life experiences with those who are likely to have similar backgrounds (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Empowering students by fostering critical consciousness, developing a positive identity, and encouraging social action are also significant roles for social justice advocates. Empowerment theory requires professional school counselors’ work to extend beyond the boundaries of the school and to include
encouraging the participation of parents and community members (Musheno & Talbert, 2002). Extending the process of empowerment to parents of marginalized children and to community members can ultimately benefit the children's sociopolitical status (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

**Relational Cultural Theory**

According to RCT, the goal of healthy development is the ability to participate in relationships that foster growth. RCT views isolation as a fundamental source of suffering in people’s lives. RCT also recognizes oppressive barriers such as isolation, shame, and humiliation as central to human suffering, creating the majority of the pain and trauma experienced by marginalized people (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). “Healing takes place in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships. In an effort to create such relationships, the RCT approach to counseling involves identifying and deconstructing obstacles to mutuality that individuals encounter in diverse relational contexts and networks” (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279).

A key concept of RCT is relational awareness of the connections and disconnections individuals experience in their relationships with others. The Central Relational Paradox (CRP) presumes that all individuals have a need for positive relationships with and acceptance from others. Because individuals develop doubts about their ability to be accepted or loved, the connections made with others are not as rewarding as they might be under different conditions.

RCT is based upon seven central tenets: 1) People grow through and toward relationship throughout the lifespan; 2) Movement toward mutuality rather than movement toward separation characterizes mature functioning; 3) Relationship-
differentiation and elaboration characterize growth; 4) Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships; 5) Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationships; 6) In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit; development is not a one-way street; and 7) One of the goals of development from a relational perspective includes the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the lifespan (Jordan, 2000, p. 1007).

Although traditional Western ideology maintains that individualism and independence are central to healthy psychological development, RCT posits that healthy development is grounded in the healthy, positive relationships we develop with others. RCT theorists contend that Western principles of individuation, separation, and independence contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups by creating a drive for people to exert power in their relationships (Comstock, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 2006).

Through RCT, counselors have the opportunity to become more responsive to the worldview of students while encouraging healthy, growth-producing relationships (Comstock et al., 2008). When professional school counselors fail to practice social justice advocacy at the individual or school levels or in the public arena, they become responsible for perpetuating the same systemic oppression marginalized individuals experience outside the counseling relationship (Comstock et al., 2008). In isolation, individuals become ashamed and believe they are defective as human beings. Students who are unable to connect with others will lack the ability to access the power, services, resources, and information that would allow them to reach their true potential in life.
Delimitations

The selection of participants from members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) who have email addresses listed in the online membership directory delimits this study. With this method of sampling, participants were limited to members of ASCA who had an active email address listed in the online membership directory. Professional school counselors who are members of ASCA may differ from those who are not members of ASCA. Likewise, professional school counselors who have an active email address may differ from those who do not have active email addresses.

Definition of Terms

In this study, professionals with a master’s, educational specialist, or doctoral degree in school counseling and the required state issued certificate or license will be known as professional school counselors. Social justice advocacy refers to efforts aimed at removing oppressive barriers at all levels in order to create a just society. Social justice advocates are counselors actively working to remove oppressive barriers for students and their families. The three levels of social justice advocacy are those outlined by the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) (Appendix A). These levels include the client/student level, the school/community level, and the larger public arena. Each level identifies direct and indirect interventions for counselors acting as social justice advocates, as well as offering counselors a means for determining when they should act with or on behalf of an individual, and when microlevel or macrolevel approaches are necessary (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). Equality is defined as providing the same resources, access, and interventions for all students. Equity means providing additional resources, access, and interventions for students who require more due to oppression.
CHAPTER 2
SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Reinventing the role of the professional school counselor and returning the profession to its roots in social justice and advocacy will support efforts to increase achievement and opportunity for all students. The challenges facing education today call for innovative uses of time, personnel, and resources to provide all students with the knowledge and skills essential for success at the postsecondary level and in the workplace. Through social justice advocacy on the part of professional school counselors, schools can begin to remove oppressive barriers for marginalized students, close the achievement and opportunity gaps, ensure that no student is left behind, and ultimately, provide a quality education for all students.

This selected review of the literature includes an overview of the meaning and necessity of advocacy and advocacy counseling and of social justice and social justice counseling. In addition, I review the significance of social justice advocacy in school counseling; the impact of education reform and current initiatives on the role of the professional school counselor; and social justice advocacy beliefs, attitudes, and action as related to the role of the professional school counselor.

Advocacy

Advocacy is the process of supporting or speaking out in support of an idea or a cause on behalf of others in an effort to change or influence opinions or actions for the good of an individual or group (Advocacy, 2009). It is also the intent to influence the
political, economic, and social systems and institutions that have a direct impact on people (Cohen, 2001). In concrete terms, advocacy is “a process for pleading the rights of others who for some reason are unable to help themselves to acquire the services, treatment, or both, that they have a right to receive” (Kurpius & Rozecki, 1992, p. 179). Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2004) defined advocacy as the promotion of something not necessarily supported by others. Although advocacy has many definitions, the general principle involves addressing injustices at the individual, group, and system levels to improve conditions for the benefit of all members of society (House & Martin, 1998). Advocacy in counseling represents a means of changing the environment to meet the needs of individuals, rather than requiring individuals to adapt to environmental constraints.

Though advocacy has been an ongoing theme in counseling throughout the history of the profession (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lewis & Bradley, 2000), current literature indicates a renewed interest in the topic (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007). Traditionally, school counselors have promoted change within individuals and groups while also helping individuals adapt to society (House & Martin, 1998). The counseling profession ignored the impact of environmental factors until it became apparent that many issues could not be resolved by working solely with individuals and that without systemic change, some clients would never have the opportunity to reach their full potential intellectually, socially, or emotionally (Vera & Speight, 2003).

Advocacy in school counseling refers to acting with or for a student, group of students, or student issue while providing support and resources both inside and outside
the school setting (Field & Baker, 2004). Advocacy counseling is “action taken by a counseling professional to facilitate the removal of external and institutional barriers to clients’ well-being” (Toporek & Liu, 2001, p. 387). Advocacy counseling thus aims to empower individuals and foster environmental changes that will remove oppressive barriers (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, and D’Andrea, 2003).

Because of the influence of environmental factors on the academic achievement of marginalized and oppressed students, the role of advocacy is vital to the counseling profession (Eriksen, 1999). The primary role of professional school counselors who act as social justice advocates is to provide access and create opportunities for all students to achieve at high levels (House & Martin, 1998). “Advocacy to support student achievement involves specific skills, not just a philosophical orientation to function as an advocate” (Field & Baker, 2004). As a result of their education, training, and skills, professional school counselors can be instrumental in this process (Toporek, 2000). Lewis and Bradley (2000) described advocacy counseling as the framework that explains how professional school counselors practice social justice. They concluded, “All too often, negative aspects of the environment impinge on a [student's] well-being, intensifying personal problems or creating obstacles to growth. When such situations arise, effective counselors speak up!” (p. 3).

**Social Justice**

Defining social justice can be a complex undertaking. Love (2000) defined social justice as an intentional awareness of systemic forces of oppression. Vera and Speight (2003) described it as having the central focus of responding to groups that are marginalized and disenfranchised due to systemic inequalities. “Social justice is both a
process and a goal,” notes Bell (1997, p. 1). Holcomb-McCoy (2007) defined social justice as the idea of a just society and “the way in which human rights are manifested in everyday lives of people at every level of society” (p. 17). Social justice targets marginalized individuals and groups and recognizes that the application of identical rules to diverse groups of people generates inequitable results (Bemack & Chung, 2008).

Social justice requires that all people, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, age, size, or other characteristics, have the same rights and opportunities to reach their potential and to become contented, productive members of society (Green et al., 2008; Williams & Buboltz, 1999). It also requires a focus on equity rather than equality (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Creating a society that affords individuals and groups fair treatment and an impartial share of the benefits of society is essential to the well-being of all members of society (Vera & Speight, 2003). To begin a paradigm shift away from discriminatory practices to a nation where all people are free from prejudicial treatment requires awareness and acknowledgement of the harm oppression inflicts on the majority group as well as on those who are oppressed (Bell, 1997). As the diversity of society increases, so does the need to embrace social justice as a critical component of counseling and psychology (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001).

Social justice counseling maintains that professional school counselors can challenge the status quo as a means of empowering clients while also confronting injustice and inequality. The most comprehensive definition of social justice counseling, and the one most frequently cited in the literature, describes social justice in counseling as follows:
Social justice counseling represents a multifaceted approach to counseling in which practitioners strive to simultaneously promote human development and the common good through addressing challenges related to both individual and distributive justice. Social justice counseling includes empowerment of the individual as well as active confrontation of injustice and inequality in society as they impact clientele as well as those in their systemic contexts. In doing so, social justice counselors direct attention to the promotion of four critical principles that guide their work; equity, access, participation, and harmony. This work is done with a focus on the cultural, contextual, and individual needs of those served. (Crethar, Torres Rivera, & Nash, 2008, p. 269)

There is increasing evidence of the need to move away from traditional counseling, with a focus on interpersonal or intrapersonal concerns, and towards a social justice perspective focusing on the impact of external forces such as oppression, discrimination, prejudice, sexism, classism, and poverty on the mental health of students (Goodman et al., 2004; Lee, 1998). Professional school counselors must find ways to work towards an equitable world in which resources, responsibilities, and human rights are accessible to all students. Given such equity, all students would have the ability to access services, power, and information. Because professional school counselors work with all students and have the education and training to provide a voice for the marginalized and oppressed, they must consider these barriers and engage in activities to change current conditions.

Social justice, however, cannot be viewed as the pursuit of happiness for all, since sometimes equity involves the loss of advantages for some in order to guarantee justice
for all (Green et al., 2008). Social justice approaches to counseling enable professional school counselors to understand and empower students with self-advocacy skills in order that the students will develop an “empowered frame of reference” (Field & Baker, 2004, p. 587). It is through this frame of reference that students can overcome academic, emotional, social, or systemic barriers.

**Significance of Social Justice Advocacy in School Counseling**

The need for professional school counselors to become social justice advocates has been well documented (Bailey et al., 2003; House & Martin, 1998; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Professional school counselors have both a moral and ethical responsibility to become student advocates and serve as social and political change agents (Lee, 2007). Social justice advocacy emphasizes the belief that action is necessary to right injustices and improve circumstances for the benefit of others (House & Martin, 1998). Steele (2008) defined social justice advocacy as “professional practice, research, or scholarship intended to identify and intervene in social policies and practices that have a negative impact on the mental health of clients who are marginalized on the basis of their social status” (p. 76). Both social justice and advocacy accentuate the connection between mental health and oppressive environmental and social factors (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Social justice advocacy also calls for professional school counselors to become proactive in their work with students and implement unconventional strategies; challenge norms; and question policies, rules, and regulations that oppress and marginalize some students (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Osborne et al., 1998).

Social justice advocacy involves working with students to change the system rather than teaching students how to work within the system; it acknowledges the racism,
classism, sexism, able-ism, heterosexism, and other oppressive barriers that exist in our schools (Dahir & Stone, 2003; House & Hayes, 2002). Social justice advocacy in professional school counseling promotes identifying students by their strengths rather than their limitations (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). It seeks to provide all students access to rigorous coursework in school and uses data to evaluate and guide counseling services and interventions (ASCA, 2003, 2005). Professional school counselors practicing social justice advocacy work to ensure equity in education while also raising social justice awareness at the micro and macro levels (Dahir & Stone, 2003).

Social justice advocates seek additional knowledge and skills when working with students of diverse cultures to better understand and act on behalf of these students (Dahir & Stone, 2009). Social justice advocacy requires professional school counselors “to embrace new professional roles as they implement a broad range of services aimed at promoting the mental health of persons from diverse groups and backgrounds in contemporary society” (Crethar et al., 2008, p. 277). Ultimately, social justice advocacy brings about the empowerment and psychological liberation of all students (Steele, 2008).

Kiselica and Robinson (2001) argue that a social justice advocacy approach to counseling also demands a personal commitment to humanitarianism and the alleviation of human suffering. Professional school counselors have unique insight into the academic, social, and emotional needs of oppressed and marginalized students (Dahir & Stone, 2003; House & Hayes, 2002). Professional school counselors thus have the ability and opportunity to advocate for and with students in their schools and communities, to teach self-advocacy and empowerment skills, to access services for and with students,
and to teach and encourage students to become self-advocates (Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2005).

To become social justice advocates, professional school counselors must have a deep understanding of social justice advocacy issues and the knowledge and skills to become part of the solution. The role of the professional school counselor must move from that of helper, responder, and friend to that of leader and social justice advocate. This paradigm shift will further the movement in the counseling profession from service-driven to intentional, purposeful, and data-driven (Dahir & Stone, 2003). Elements essential to social justice advocacy counseling include: (a) counseling and intervention planning; (b) consultation; (c) connecting schools, families, and communities; (d) collecting and using data; (e) challenging bias; and (f) coordinating student services (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Impact of Education Reform and Current Counseling Initiatives

In responding to accountability efforts, education reform, national standards, evidence-based education, and the ever-changing landscape of our society, professional school counselors must “respect the past and embrace the present, but forge a new vision to the future” (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 3). Professional school counselors can no longer fall back on the roles of counselor, coordinator, and consultant, meeting the needs of individuals and small numbers of students. Instead, they must become leaders in school reform efforts and social justice advocates for all students, as “Social justice advocacy is a key task of the 21st century professional school counselor” (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 91). Counselors must have the awareness, understanding, knowledge, and skills to become social justice advocates as described in the American Counselor
Association (ACA) advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2003, 2005) National Model. “Advocating for the academic success of every student is a key role of school counselors and places them as leaders in promoting school reform” (ASCA, 2003, p. 24).

**Education Reform**

The gap in academic achievement between oppressed and marginalized students as compared to their White, middle- and upper-class counterparts has been a recent focus of education reform (The Education Trust, 2001). Marginalized students are often placed at risk for academic failure by school practices that relegate them to lower quality education and, by extension, lower quality futures (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). A one in three dropout rate overall, and one in two dropout rate for Latinos and African Americans, is becoming widely accepted in the United States (Diplomas Count, 2008). Nationwide, more than half of all students with disabilities fail to earn a high school diploma (Orfield, 2004). Each day, 6,829 students in the U.S. drop out of school; in Georgia alone, 331 students drop out daily (Diplomas Count, 2008). Eventually, these dropout rates lead to higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes, higher rates of incarceration, and the likelihood that these patterns will continue in future generations (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

This gap in achievement relates directly to oppressive barriers rather than to the actual abilities of the students (Cox & Lee, 2007). As budgetary constraints force educational leaders to cut programs and schools struggle to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), professional school counselors must become an integral part of school reform and take on leadership roles in the schools.
“School counselors [need] to embrace a social justice advocacy perspective and help lead school reform efforts to challenge educational inequities” (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

Professional school counselors must dispense with the beliefs and attitudes of the past, when it was acceptable to simply sit behind a desk and wait for students to ask for help. Instead, they must become proactive change agents for students. Goodman et al. (2004) stated that “unless fundamental change occurs within our neighborhoods, schools, media, culture, and religious, political, and social institutions, our work with individuals is destined to be, at best, only partially successful” (p. 797). To effectively assist students from historically oppressed groups, professional school counselors must engage in interventions that create more socially just environments for students.

Although accountability measures such as NCLB (2002) have not directly influenced professional school counselors, the academic achievement of every student is the responsibility of every member of the school community (Dahir & Stone, 2009). As accountability, standards, and evidence-based reform in education increase, so must the accountability efforts of the professional school counselor. Current initiatives such as The Education Trust’s Transforming School Counseling Initiative (The Education Trust, 2001), the ASCA National Standards (2004), the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005), and the ACA’s advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) support the need for social justice advocacy in the school counseling profession. Ratts et al. (2007) encouraged counselors to “embrace a social justice advocacy perspective and help lead school reform efforts to challenge educational inequities such as achievement gaps stemming from the less than ideal learning environment that is prevalent in many schools” (p. 91).
**The Education Trust’s Transforming School Counseling Initiative**

Initially introduced in 1997, The Education Trust’s Transforming School Counseling Initiative created a working definition of the new role of the professional school counselor. Though TSCI preserved the role of the professional school counselor in the social, emotional, and personal development of students, academic achievement with an emphasis on educational equity became the primary focus. The TSCI redefined the role of the professional school counselor to highlight social and academic equity for all students (Bemak & Chung, 2005). With future projections indicating that a majority of children attending public schools will be from diverse backgrounds (Zhou, 2003), the TSCI focused on addressing the achievement and opportunity gaps in the United States and the important role of professional school counselors in educational improvement.

This initiative placed a strong emphasis on social justice advocacy in the client/student, school/community, and public arenas and emphasized the responsibility of professional school counselors to influence decisions that affect equity, access, and academic achievement and to alter the conditions that impede student success. By providing professional school counselors with the information necessary to become an integral part of school reform, TSCI takes professional school counselors “from the margins to the mainstream of the new mission of schools – to educate ALL students to high levels” (The Education Trust, 2001).

Recognizing that “school counselors are powerful forces in their schools and in the lives of their students” (The Education Trust, 2001), TSCI works with local and state boards of education, professional counseling associations, and institutes of higher learning to bring about reform in the counseling profession. Promoting leadership, social
justice advocacy, and accountability, the TSCI has aligned its professional development training modules with the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005). Although the ASCA National Model and TSCI differ, they are not mutually exclusive and professional school counselors can meet the requirements of both (Dahir & House, 2001).

American School Counselor Association National Standards

As their role evolved over the years, professional school counselors were unable to meet the needs of all students (House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998; Perusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001). In response to role confusion and ambiguity in the profession, the American School Counselor Association developed several initiatives to standardize counseling programs, improve effectiveness in the profession, and establish the importance of professional school counselors within the education community.

The ASCA National Standards, published in 1997, defined the professional school counselor’s role in terms of what students should know and be able to accomplish as the result of a comprehensive counseling program (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). These standards also increased the legitimacy of the profession by establishing academic, career, and personal/social competencies (Martin, 2002). The National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Dahir, 2001) addressed counseling through three developmental domains: (a) academic development, (b) career development, and (c) personal/social development.

American School Counselor Association National Model

Through the promotion of equity and access for all students, the ASCA National Standards became the foundation of the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005). As the academic achievement of all students became the focus of education reform in the 21st
century and standards-based education established accountability measures for teachers and administrators, legislation did not address the role of the professional school counselor. In response to this oversight, and in an attempt to move counseling from an ancillary position to one of leadership and significance in the movement to close the achievement and opportunity gaps, the ASCA developed its National Model (ASCA, 2003, 2005).

This model provided professional school counselors with a standards-based, data-driven comprehensive school counseling program (Dahir & Stone, 2009) that supported the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students. With a focus on systemic change and advocacy and in accordance with the fundamental elements of the TSCI, the ASCA National Model provided professional school counselors with a way to connect counseling to student achievement and the academic mission of schools (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). In this model, school counseling programs emphasize counselor advocacy, collaboration, and leadership skills in an effort to effect systemic change. The ASCA National Model also allows professional school counselors to incorporate the ACA’s advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), which complement the ASCA National Model and support the themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and teaming, and systemic change.

**American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies**

As the needs of students grew due to increased environmental and societal oppression, the ACA began exploring ways to integrate social justice advocacy into the counseling profession (Lewis et al., 2002). Noting the negative impact of oppression on the academic achievement and mental health of students, it became apparent that “these
kinds of inequities signify the need for counseling professionals to make a more
conzerted effort at addressing environmental factors that serve as barriers to academic,
career, and personal/social development” (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009, p. 269).

The intent of the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) was to help
counselors understand the negative impact of oppression on human development and
eourage the use of interventions at the micro and macro levels when working with
students (Ratts et al., 2007). The endorsement of the ACA advocacy competencies by the
ACA Governing Council supported the role of the counselor as a social justice advocate
and the importance of social justice advocacy in the field of counseling. These
competencies also provided counselors with the framework to develop interventions and
strategies appropriate for working with or on behalf of students (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009):

In short, the ACA advocacy competencies illuminate the critical need to extend
and redefine the important role school counselors can play in addressing the
academic achievement gap that exists in the United States by implementing a
broad range of multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change
interventions in school settings. (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 374)

Recognizing the impact of oppression on marginalized students, the ACA
advocacy competencies included two dimensions of client involvement and three levels
of intervention that created six distinctly different domains (Lewis et al., 2002). The
dimensions of student involvement consisted of “acting with” and “acting on behalf of”
students. The levels of intervention included the client/student level, the
school/community level, and the public arena. The resulting domains included
client/student empowerment, client/student advocacy, community collaboration, systems
advocacy, public information, and social political advocacy. Moreover, “working within one level of the advocacy competencies will often require counselors to engage in other levels of advocacy” (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009, p. 270).

Counselors who acknowledge the relationship between individuals and their environment will implement interventions that focus on both direct and indirect care for students. The ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) allow professional school counselors to meet the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students, as stated in the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005). “Within the context of K-12 schools, the ACA advocacy competencies can aid professional school counselors in meeting the challenges that come with being a social change agent” (Rubel & Ratts, 2007).

**Social Justice Advocacy Beliefs, Attitudes, Perceptions, and Actions**

Beliefs determine attitudes; attitudes determine actions. If professional school counselors believe all students can learn and achieve at high levels, their attitudes and actions will necessarily reflect these beliefs. With regard to education reform, Noguera (2002) stated:

> When I look at American Education . . . I know that it is largely about will and belief—that is, do we really believe that all children can achieve and learn at high levels? And so far, the only answer I can come up with is that we don’t. We believe that about some kids and not others. (p. 1)

However, in spite of the overwhelming need evidenced in the literature (Bailey et al., 2003; Field & Baker, 2004; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005) and in our schools (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Orfield, 2004), many professional school counselors are not acting as social
justice advocates for all students. Regrettably, a variety of factors have prevented professional school counselors from becoming the social justice advocates schools need. Lack of self-awareness and assessment, a lack of knowledge about how to implement the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), and personal and professional obstacles often interfere with a professional school counselor’s progress toward taking on the role of social justice advocate and proactive change agent (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

**Beliefs and Attitudes**

Central to the vision of incorporating social justice advocacy into school counseling are the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of professional school counselors. Although the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) and the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005) challenged counselors to move into this new and more responsive role of social justice advocate, change happens gradually and depends upon people’s beliefs and circumstances. Since many professional school counselors find comfort in their current role, they resist change for a variety of reasons. To embrace social justice advocacy behaviors fully, professional school counselors must develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills associated with “giving a voice to disenfranchised groups” (Green et al., 2008, p. 19). Without these proficiencies, professional school counselors will lack the ability to understand students in the context of their environment. Consequently, they may continue to rely on outdated interventions that focus on “fixing” the individual rather than using a social justice advocacy lens to view the environmental factors contributing to oppression.
Hatch and Chen-Hayes (2008) reported that professional school counselors believe the most important domain in the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005) is establishing explicit goals for the school counseling program; addressing the student-to-counselor ratio was rated as the second most important domain. The counselors rated using school data to identify achievement gaps and monitoring students’ academic achievement among the least important aspects of the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005). The collection and use of data are central to the work of a social justice advocate and essential to identifying and removing oppressive barriers for students.

**Self-awareness.** While data collection and interpretation may require some counselors to seek out training, self-awareness is another step towards implementing social justice advocacy in schools. Through self-awareness, professional school counselors examine their personal values, biases, stereotypes, and limitations to learn more about themselves and others (Green et al., 2008). Social justice advocacy requires professional school counselors to have highly developed self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Effective social justice advocates must understand their own personality as well as how they personally influence the counseling relationship. Social justice advocates must also have the ability to appreciate the client’s worldview without judgment and a systemic awareness and desire to challenge oppressive barriers that inhibit student development (Lee, 2007).

**Assessment.** Before counselors can advocate for others, they must first understand themselves. Communication, leadership, collaboration, teamwork, advocacy, technology, coordination, consultation, and interpersonal skills are critical components of social justice advocacy in counseling (Musheno & Talbert, 2002). Reflecting on personal
experiences and influences allows counselors to develop social justice advocacy skills. The process of self-exploration compels professional school counselors to examine personal strengths and weaknesses in order to assess their abilities related to social justice advocacy (Green et al., 2008).

The development of a realistic view of strengths and weaknesses allow counselors to identify areas in which further education and training are required. When working toward systemic change, counselors must have complete and accurate information or they may damage their reputation or credibility (Ratts et al., 2007). It is essential for professional school counselors to be aware of their limitations when attempting to challenge and change the current state of affairs on a personal or political level. Any lack of knowledge or professionalism can thwart attempts to alter the status quo.

**Perceptions**

Chibbaro & Cao (2008) examined the perceptions of school counselors-in-training (SCIT) and professional school counselors regarding the definition of advocacy, advocacy actions, advocacy skills and knowledge, and advocacy obligations. The findings showed no significant difference between the two groups in their perceptions of any of the subscales. In addition, taking an advocacy class had no significant influence on the advocacy perceptions of counselors. Finally, the study found significance in the perceptions according to whether or not the individual was a student or practicing school counselor and whether the counselor was employed at the elementary, middle, or high school level.

In their qualitative study, Singh et al. (2010) identified seven strategies professional school counselors used to promote change, and from these findings
developed an emergent model of social justice strategies. Specifically, political savvy and consciousness raising were found to be strategies used routinely in social justice advocacy efforts. The remaining strategies were found to be more situational. Being able to talk to others about sensitive topics, forming relationships with others to build advocacy coalitions, teaching students to self-advocate, using data to inform others of social justice issues, and educating stakeholders on the importance of advocacy in school counseling were identified as strategies commonly used. Singh et al. (2010) concluded with a checklist for use by counselor educators when teaching social justice strategies to students.

**Action Based on the ACA Advocacy Competencies**

Implementing the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) provides professional school counselors with the structure to respond to personal, institutional, systemic, and cultural barriers to their students’ well-being. These competencies require professional school counselors to work towards solutions to current problems and to intentionally search for ways to promote social justice for the individual student, in the school, in the community, and in the public arena (Lee & Rodgers, 2009; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Toporek et al., 2009).

Professional school counselors who work with students to provide empowerment strategies and intervention promote healthy development and fight oppression. Empowering students through the identification of strengths and resources and helping them identify the social, political, economic, and cultural factors influencing their lives gives students a greater probability of mental health and overall success in life (Crethar et
Students also need to be able to identify responses to oppression and determine the external barriers that limit their development.

In addition, students need self-advocacy skills and assistance in developing and carrying out self-advocacy plans. Language barriers, along with social, economic, and cultural factors, may cause students to feel inferior and unsure about asking for assistance in schools (Bridgeland et al., 2006). By bringing these issues to the forefront and developing strategies to address them, professional school counselors assist students in getting their academic and social needs met in school. Professional school counselors also work on behalf of students to create and implement programs that educate students and parents about available resources and how they can access those (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009).

Through community collaboration, professional school counselors become aware of recurring problems and may offer their counseling skills to local organizations working for change (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009). As a systems advocate, professional school counselors identify factors inhibiting students’ development and collect, provide, and interpret data to show the need for change. Professional school counselors also collaborate to form a vision of change and develop plans for implementing the change (Lewis et al., 2002).

Working at the public information and social/political levels, professional school counselors identify and communicate the effects of oppression on the healthy development of students. The same barriers professional school counselors see inhibiting healthy development in schools are often problems at the macro level as well. Because counselors have expertise in human development and communication, they are in a
position to act as change agents (Lee & Rodgers, 2009). Educating the public on issues such as education reform and access can set change in motion, whether through the election of a school board member or a state official.

Overall, the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) can help promote the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students at the individual level; influence local, state, and national decisions about education; and transform the educational system at large. Professional school counselors using the ACA advocacy competencies can become leaders in school reform and the movement towards social justice advocacy for all students.

**Personal obstacles.** Bemak and Chung (2008) used the phrase “nice counselor syndrome” (NCS) to describe professional school counselors who allow personal obstacles to prevent them from implementing the professional changes necessary to become social justice advocates. Linking NCS to prior roles of counselors who maintained the status quo and were viewed as friendly and likeable, this study reported a fear of being disliked or socially ostracized, labeled a troublemaker, or personally rejected as motives for counselors to remain in their current role rather than advocate for students.

Additionally, professional school counselors reported feeling powerless to implement necessary changes due to a lack of administrative support and overwhelmed by the vast needs of oppressed students. In addition, the lack of school personnel willing to support social justice advocacy was identified as a factor that inhibited social justice advocacy efforts. Lastly, an inability to deal with the personal discomfort that occurs
when confronting colleagues with social justice advocacy issues immobilized some professional school counselors (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

**Professional obstacles.** In spite of current initiatives such as the TSCI, the ASCA National Model, and the ACA advocacy competencies, the role of the professional school counselor remains unclear to many practitioners. Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton (2006) stated the following reasons for this confusion:

(a) All key players do not know what a school counselor's role is, and when they do, they do not always agree on that role; (b) the power differentials inherent in the relationships among key players make it difficult for the school counselor's role to become institutionalized; and (c) economic, regional, local, and student needs play a significant part in altering the daily functioning of an individual professional school counselor's duties. (p. 250)

In addition, many counselors lack the education and training to assume the role of social justice advocate and are reluctant to assume these new responsibilities due to the personal and professional obstacles inherent in this change (Field & Baker, 2004). Appropriate training increases professional school counselors’ ability to implement the ACA advocacy competencies and meet the daily challenges of a diverse society. If counselors are to work to remove barriers to learning and achievement for all students, they must first be equipped with the skills necessary to meet these challenges (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Although some graduate programs infuse the counselor education curriculum with social justice advocacy, many professional school counselors lack the training and skills necessary to become advocates for students. “Advocates need to have
knowledge of resources, parameters of practice, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change” (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 263).

As evidenced in the literature, a general lack of confidence in awareness and skills prevents many professional school counselors from challenging oppressive barriers in schools (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Field & Baker, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Vera & Speight, 2003). Additionally, for many experienced professional school counselors the paradigm shift from a service model focused on counseling, coordinating, and consulting to one of social justice advocacy focused on data-driven interventions for all students, schools, communities, and the public arena has proven overwhelming. Rather than work toward change, they are content to continue on the familiar path.

While researchers have stated the need and high regard for social justice advocacy, the awareness of social injustices has not translated into action (Bemak & Chung, 2008; D’Andrea & Daniels, 1999; Vera & Speight, 2003). Professional school counselors who believe in the ability of all students to learn and the right of all students to fully participate in society should be inclined to operate in ways that support this belief; however, in the majority of cases beliefs have not extended to action (Bemak & Chung, 2008). Additionally, Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) found while there has been a substantial increase in literature on counseling and social justice advocacy, there is an absence of empirical research. According to Bemak & Chung (2005):

It is essential for school counselors to have the skills to balance the institutional realities of working within systems where they have minimal power yet have the
ethical and moral responsibility to advocate for social justice and equity for all students. (p. 196)

In 2004, Field and Baker found that professional school counselors’ advocacy behaviors were reactive to students and lacked a systemic focus. Participants in their study recognized the need for advocating with and on behalf of students but did not report engaging in social justice advocacy behavior. Overwhelming workloads and the number of responsibilities assigned by administrators were primary reasons cited for the lack of social justice advocacy behaviors. Overall, professional school counselors reported feeling that social justice advocacy was simply beyond their abilities (Field & Baker, 2004).

Professional school counselors also lack confidence in their values, skills, and personalities related to advocacy (Erikson, 1999). Kiselica and Robinson (2001) proposed the necessity of personal experiences to create a profound commitment to social justice advocacy:

. . . to identify some human condition that moves them so deeply that it inspires a personal moral imperative to make this world a better place by advocating for others in a manner that suits their personality. We are convinced that it is not possible for us as counselors to engage in genuine social action unless we discover such a personal moral imperative to serve as the driving force behind our work. (p. 396)

However, Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, and Hof (2008) observed some persons still see multiculturalism and social justice advocacy as a passing trend rather than a necessary component of counseling programs.
Conclusion

The challenges faced by students and the educational system today are unlike those of the past. Calls to leave no child behind have brought the education of all students into focus for educators throughout the United States. The 21st century has introduced accountability measures that enforce the collection and use of data to determine best practices and cause educators to reflect on student achievement or the lack thereof. “Vision without action is meaningless,” observes Spinetta (2002, p. 24). Professional school counselors must act as social justice advocates to ensure that all students have the opportunity to pursue their hopes and dreams.

In order to fully implement the ACA advocacy competencies and the ASCA National Model, social justice advocacy must become an integral part of every school counseling program. The success of students and education reform depend upon professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates. Professional school counselors have the ability to influence the mission of the schools when acting as social justice advocates. From enrolling students and placing them in classes to teaching self-advocacy to working for legislative reform, counselors have opportunities to ensure that every child receives a quality education.

Moving beyond “nice counselor syndrome” (Bemak & Chung, 2008) to the role of proactive change agent is a daunting task. However, every student is entitled to a fair and just education, and professional school counselors must have the training and skills to be a voice for those who are marginalized and oppressed. “Professional school counselors can be effective in closing the achievement gap if they engage in professional
counselor duties and deliver a multicultural comprehensive school guidance program that advocates for all students” (Mitcham-Smith, 2007, p. 342).
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

While current research on the topic of social justice advocacy in school counseling is increasing, limited research exists on the topic of the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors. Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) explored the variables contributing to social justice advocacy among graduate students enrolled in counseling programs. Of the variables examined, the desire to become involved in social justice advocacy and political interest most closely predicted engagement in social justice advocacy.

Singh et al. (2010) examined the practice of advocacy through the experiences of school counselors and identified seven strategies used by the participants in their efforts as social justice advocates in their schools. These authors also note the lack of literature that includes the voice of school counselors acting as social justice advocates (Singh et al., 2010). The current research study is important to the counseling profession and the success of marginalized students in that the research provides quantitative data and gives voice to professional school counselors working as social justice advocates.

Using a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), this study sought to examine professional school counselors’ perceptions of social justice advocacy, explore the relationship between these perceptions and counselors’ efforts to act as social justice advocates, and identify factors that influence professional school counselors’ social justice advocacy efforts with and for students and their families.
This section provides information about participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analyses. First, the participants and their characteristics are described, along with the sampling method. Next, the instrumentation is explained through the description of the psychometric properties. Data collection follows, including research design and procedures. Finally, a description of the data analysis for each research question is included. Specifically, this study sought to answer the question, “What perceptions do professional school counselors have about social justice advocacy for students and what factors are influential in the decisions professional school counselors make regarding social justice advocacy?”

**The Role of the Researcher**

In a mixed methods study there are multiple roles for the researcher. The function of the quantitative researcher and the qualitative researcher are fundamentally different. The quantitative researcher uses deductive reasoning; measures and records objective, closed-ended data; and carries out statistical analyses on that numerical data. The quantitative researcher neither participates in nor influences what is being studied. Using an emergent, exploratory, and inductive approach, the qualitative researcher interprets subjective, open-ended data.

Qualitative research assumes that the researcher is an integral part of the research. The researcher sets aside, or brackets, all preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand to the greatest extent possible. This allows the researcher to understand more fully the experience from the participant's own point of view. According to Moustakas (1994), it is impossible for researchers to bracket themselves completely from their own subjective viewpoints.
Participants

The target population for this study included professional school counselors who were members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and had an active email address in the 2010 online membership directory. ASCA provides counselors with professional development opportunities, current research on best practices, publications, resources, and support for counseling efforts. Members of ASCA include professional school counselors from a variety of settings, including all levels of schools, private practice, and counselor educators.

Currently ASCA has more than 27,000 members with varying levels of experience; the online membership directory contained more than 23,000 email addresses. Approximately 12,000 of these counselors identified themselves as working as a P-16 counselor. A random sample of 4000 counselors who work as school counselors at one of the P-16 levels received an email that included an embedded link to the survey questionnaire containing the demographic survey, the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008), and the open-ended questions.

Data Collection

Using a convergent parallel mixed methods model of research design (see Figure 1), this study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a broader overall view of the research questions. The integration of mixed methods allowed the researcher to incorporate complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses from both methods to obtain differing but complementary data on the same topic. Using inductive and deductive methods allowed the researcher to incorporate numerical and text
Figure 1: Convergent Parallel Design. This representation of a convergent parallel design illustrates how data is collected simultaneously, the methods are given equal weighting, and the data results are compared for convergence, differences, or a
data, collected concurrently, so the overall strength of the study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative data collection alone could provide (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). A mixed methods research design allowed the exploration of all sides of the problem and provided the ability to validate one form of data with the other form, and to transform the data for comparison.

**Research Design**

This study utilized a convergent parallel approach in data collection. The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data permitted the researcher to determine convergence, differences, or a combination of the two in the data (Creswell, 2009). Using separate quantitative and qualitative methods allowed the researcher to offset any weaknesses inherent in one method through the strengths of the alternate method. In this study, equal weight was given to each method with the intent of integrating the two databases (Creswell, 2009).

This design involved separate but concurrent data collection and analysis of both types of data to provide a broad view and understanding of the research problem. The use of mixed methods allowed the researcher to incorporate worldviews associated with postpositivism and social constructivism. It also incorporated the use of data and text in problem solving, and the opportunity to combine inductive and deductive thinking (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The inclusion of numerical and textual data allowed the researcher to analyze the data separately, then merge the data during interpretation.

**Quantitative design.** A quantitative approach seeks to examine the relationship between variables measured by instruments to obtain numerical data that can be analyzed using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009). Using a post positivist lens, the
quantitative portion of this study sought to identify the factors influencing outcomes. Specifically, the quantitative portion of this study sought to analyze the relationship between the perceptions professional school counselors hold regarding social justice advocacy and their willingness to act as advocates at all levels.

**Qualitative design.** Phenomenological studies seek to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of individuals related to a specific concept or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), as well as the meanings these individuals make from their experiences. “The investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). Through the exploration of personal experiences as perceived by the participants, phenomenological researchers immerse themselves in the findings and create a view of the “universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59) of a phenomenon.

In this study, phenomenology allowed the researcher to elicit the perceptions of the lived experiences of professional school counselors as related to social justice advocacy in the school setting. By studying these perceptions, the researcher sought to discover the essence of the phenomenon of social justice advocacy for the participants. Focusing on the exploration of the phenomenon of social justice advocacy as experienced by the participants, the researcher hoped to gain an understanding of the perceptions of professional school counselors with regard to acting as social justice advocates for students.

The use of phenomenology in this study permitted the inclusion of the voices of the participants as they reflected on the phenomenon of social justice advocacy in
schools. Focusing “less on the interpretation of the researcher” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59) and more on the exploration of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants, this researcher hoped to gain an understanding of what the experience of being a social justice advocate for students is like for professional school counselors. Although the design of the study did not allow for member checking, this did not substantially limit the study, since transcription was not necessary due to the nature of the questionnaire. To build trustworthiness, a research team participated in and examined the research steps from the start of the research project to the development and reporting of findings.

**Procedures**

Once the University of Georgia granted Institutional Review Board permission, the study was announced via email to potential participants. Email addresses were collected from the ASCA online membership directory and a random sample of 4000 email addresses was selected using a random number generator. An electronic survey was used to provide convenient, reliable access to counselors throughout the United States. The demographic questionnaire, survey, and open-ended questions were administered electronically through SurveyMonkey. The survey link was e-mailed to each identified professional school counselor. An e-mail collector feature of SurveyMonkey ensured anonymity and confidentiality of responses. In addition, email addresses and IP addresses were not collected, nor were they available to the researcher.

An online link to the survey questionnaire was embedded in the email sent to the identified professional school counselors. Included in the email was an introductory letter (Appendix B) providing pertinent information as well as instructions for the study and a link to the survey questionnaire at https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GZ3H8Z5. Before
beginning the survey questionnaire, potential participants were presented with an informed consent letter (Appendix C) to ensure that their participation, full or partial, was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. At the end of the informed consent letter, a link to the survey questionnaire indicated their agreement to take part in the research study. The survey provided opportunities for participants to skip questions or stop the survey at any time. At the end of seven, 14, and 21 days following the first email, potential participants received an email reminder requesting their participation in the study. After a period of one month, the survey collector was closed.

**Introductory letter (Appendix B).** The introductory letter, sent in the body of the email, explained the purpose of the study to the participants. The letter also explained that participation was strictly voluntary and all information would remain confidential. Instructions directed participants to read the introductory letter carefully before proceeding to the next section of the questionnaire.

**Informed consent letter (Appendix C).** Prior to beginning any portion of the survey, participants electronically agreed to participation after reading an Informed Consent statement. This statement included the following: purpose of the research study, estimated time required for completion of the survey, eligibility criteria for participants, and the potential benefits and risks to taking part in this study. Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and all information would remain confidential. In addition, participants were informed that they could revoke their participation at any point in the survey.
Instruments

Data was obtained via a self-reported survey. The School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) provided quantitative data; a series of open-ended questions pertaining to counselors’ perceptions of social justice advocacy and the factors that influence social justice advocacy efforts in schools provided the qualitative data. In addition, participants completed a demographic survey.

Demographic questionnaire (Appendix D)

The researcher created a 9-item demographic questionnaire that provided descriptive information regarding gender, ethnicity, years in the counseling profession, and the setting in which the participant works. Participants also self-reported information about their school’s diversity, size, level, and setting. They also responded to questions asking whether they had ever taken a course focusing on social justice advocacy or multiculturalism and whether they considered themselves a social justice advocate for students.

School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families (Appendix E)

This instrument consisted of four subscales designed to measure professional school counselor perceptions of advocacy definition, advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations. The authors of this instrument “synthesized the literature and identified definitions of advocacy, advocacy actions, advocacy knowledge and skills, and advocacy obligations as the important components to examine perceptions of advocacy for school counselors” (Chibarro & Cao, 2008, p. 40). Counselor educators reviewed the instrument and minor changes resulted.
The instrument was pilot-tested with 35 school counselors-in-training enrolled in a counselor education program and no revisions were necessary. The instrument utilized a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 meaning strongly agree. The subscales each contained 10 items synthesized from research. The internal consistency of the questionnaire measured by Cronbach’s alpha (1951) is .99 for the four subscales combined, 0.94 for the advocacy definition subscale, 0.93 for the advocacy actions subscale, 0.96 for the advocacy skills and knowledge, and 0.96 for the advocacy obligations, respectively.

**Open-ended questions (Appendix F)**

The researcher created a series of questions regarding the factors that influence social justice advocacy efforts in schools. These questions explored the lived experiences of counselors and were intended to give voice to their experiences. The questions were reviewed by three counselor educators and five doctoral students enrolled in a graduate program with an emphasis on social justice. Feedback from the reviewers was incorporated into the final survey questionnaire. Questions focused on the perceptions professional school counselors have of social justice advocacy in schools, advocacy efforts at the levels identified by the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), and the primary factor(s) that prevent professional school counselors from acting as social justice advocates in schools.

**Data Analysis**

The first quantitative research question, “What is the relationship between the way professional school counselors define social justice advocacy, their perceptions about advocacy actions, their knowledge and skills related to social justice advocacy, and
their perceptions of advocacy obligations?” focused on identifying relationships in the four identified sections of the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008). Using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (PPMCC) allowed the researcher to describe and measure the correlation (linear dependence) between two or more variables (Creswell, 2009). The PPMCC provides the direction of the relationship (positive or negative), the form of the relationship (linear or non-linear), and the degree and strength of the relationship. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient is usually signified by r (rho), and can take on values from -1.0 to 1.0, where -1.0 is a perfect negative (inverse) correlation, 0.0 is no correlation, and 1.0 is a perfect positive correlation.

The statistical methods for the second quantitative research question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering demographic factors?” included t-tests and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). A one-way ANOVA determined statistical significance in answer to the questions, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering the differences in school level?” and “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering years of experience in school counseling?”

Last, a one-way ANOVA also determined statistical significance for the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering school setting?” A one-way ANOVA test is appropriate when there are three or more levels of a single independent variable and
provides more certainty in significance. The one-way ANOVA allows the researcher to find the average difference between the means of multiple independent groups, rather than finding the difference between two means, as in a t-test (Urdan, 2005).

A one-way ANOVA takes into account the number of groups being compared, and thus allows for more certainty in concluding significance when looking at more than two groups. Rather than finding a simple difference between two means as in a t-test, an ANOVA allows the researcher to find the average difference between means of multiple independent groups. An F-statistic derived from the ANOVA test is used to calculate the p-value. In this study, when p < .05, the findings will be considered statistically significant. This indicates that the mean of the dependent variable is not consistent for all groups. To determine which groups are different from the other(s), a post-hoc Tukey test was performed (Urdan, 2005).

The t-test for independent samples assesses whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other. This measure was used to respond to the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy training?” T-tests also determined statistical significance when examining the questions, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering identity as a social justice advocate?” and “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering the racial/ethnic diversity of the school?” An alpha level of p < .05 was used to determine statistical significance for these questions.
The third research question, “What factors are most influential in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors?” was examined using multiple regression analysis. Multiple regression is a flexible method of data analysis that may be appropriate whenever a quantitative variable (the dependent or criterion variable) is to be examined in relationship to any other factors (expressed as independent or predictor variables) (Urdan, 2005). Using multiple regressions for data analysis allowed the researcher to determine the factors that most influence social justice advocacy perceptions among professional school counselors.

Finally, the qualitative research question, “What are professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy in their work?” was evaluated through a process of inductive data analysis (i.e., coding, categorizing, and thematizing). The first step in phenomenological data collection required the researcher to bracket her beliefs; that is, to identify, suspend, and set aside personal biases, stereotypes, assumptions, and experiences so as to approach the phenomenon being explored with as much openness as possible (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher completed this task both individually and with the research team.

The second step in the data analysis, horizontalization, involved listing significant statements that are unique and recognizing that each statement has equal value. For this study, data was collected through a self-reported questionnaire, using open-ended questions to find clusters of meaning as well as structural and textual descriptions of the phenomenon. This allowed the researcher to identify the essence of the phenomenon and the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The data collection and analysis processes were recursive in nature in order to strengthen the verification process.
The primary researcher and the research team identified broad themes and significant statements. The research team also met to discuss, interpret, and evaluate the transcripts, a process known as consensual validation (Creswell, 2007). The significant statements were grouped into clusters of meaning units, larger units of information (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). These themes and subthemes provided the basis for coding the text data. Finally, the primary researcher and research team analyzed the textual description of what was experienced, the meaning of what was experienced, and the structural description of how it was experienced to determine common themes (Creswell, 2007). The significant statements were also used to write a structural description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Finally, the essence of the phenomenon detailed what was experienced and how the participants experienced it.

Knowing the influence researchers have on data collection and analysis, steps were taken to minimize bias in this study. The researcher bracketed assumptions prior to beginning data collection (Creswell, 2007). These assumptions included understanding advocacy in school counseling through a social justice lens. The researcher recognized her role as an informant in this study due to prior experiences working as a professional school counselor. Reflexive journaling provided the researcher with an ongoing account of assumptions, insights, and biases during the research process, including the assumption that many professional school counselors do not have the skills and knowledge necessary to operationalize social justice advocacy in schools. The thick, rich descriptions provided by participants also increased trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). A research team and peer debriefing ensured that the qualitative data represented the perspectives of the participants and not those of the researcher.
Conclusion

This chapter provided the methodological framework used in this research study. A convergent parallel mixed methods research design allowed for the collecting, analyzing, and mixing of quantitative and qualitative data to provide more thorough data than either design individually (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Using a national database, a random sample was obtained from the ASCA online membership directory. A survey questionnaire that included open-ended questions was used to collect information from professional school counselors. Instruments include a demographic questionnaire, the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008), and open-ended questions. Analysis of variance, multiple regression Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, and t-tests were used to analyze the quantitative research questions and the qualitative question was analyzed via phenomenological methods.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

RQ 1. What is the relationship between the way professional school counselors define social justice advocacy, their perceptions about advocacy actions, their knowledge and skills related to social justice advocacy, and their perceptions of advocacy obligations?

RQ 2. What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering factors such as school level, years of experience in school counseling, school setting, and social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy training?

RQ 3. What factors are most influential in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors?

RQ 4. What are professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy in their work?

This chapter details the quantitative and qualitative findings of the data analyses. A total of 417 electronic surveys were completed by the participants. The number of participants answering the open-ended questions ranged from 182-286 responses, due to several factors. Participants had the option to skip or omit questions they were not
comfortable answering. Participants answering no to the question regarding the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) were not asked to answer questions 4-6 and were directed to skip to question 7. A description of the sample population and the findings related to each research question are also described and presented in this chapter.

The quantitative survey data were downloaded from SurveyMonkey and stored in a Microsoft Excel file. These data were transferred, screened, and analyzed in Predictive Analytic Software 18 (PASW). Pearson product moment correlation coefficients (PPMCC), t-tests of independent means, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA), and multiple regression analyses were utilized to generate findings. The PPMCC were evaluated on a scale from -1.0 to 1.0, where -1.0 is a perfect negative (inverse) correlation, 0.0 is no correlation, and 1.0 is a perfect positive correlation. All other statistical tests were evaluated using an alpha level of .05.

The qualitative data from the survey were also downloaded from SurveyMonkey and stored in a Microsoft Excel file. These data were evaluated by the primary researcher and a research team through a process of inductive data analysis (i.e., coding, categorizing, and thematizing). Codes, themes, and categories for each open-ended question are presented in this chapter.

**Description of the Sample**

The sample included 83% (348) women, 16% (68) men, and <1% who identified as other (1). The participants who identified themselves racially/ethnically as African American comprised 10% (41) of the sample, Asian-Americans comprised 1% (5), Hispanics 5% (20), Multiracial individuals 1% (3), Native Americans 1% (3), Other 1% (3), and Whites/Caucasians 81% (338) of the sample. The professional school counselors
in the study included 31% (127) from elementary schools; 26% (106) from middle schools, 40% (166) from high schools, and 3% (15) from P-12. The number of years of experience in school counseling included 22% (90) with 1-3 years of experience, 33% (135) with 4-8 years, 14% (56) with 9-14 years, 15% (62) with 15-20 years, and 11% (47) with 21 or more years.

Professional school counselors working in schools with fewer than 500 students comprised 33% (136) of the sample; those in schools with 500-1000 students comprised 41% (170); and those in schools with more than 1000 students comprised 26% (107). Thirty-two percent (132) of participants identified their school settings as rural, 44% (185) as suburban, and 24% (99) as urban.

Fifty-nine percent (246) of participants considered their schools racially/ethnically diverse; 41% (171) did not. Ninety-four percent (392) of the professional school counselors who responded to the survey considered themselves social justice advocates for students, while 6% (25) did not. Seventy-five percent (313) of counselors had completed a course in which social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy was a main objective, while the remaining 25% (104) had not. Table 1 presents the full demographic characteristics of the sample.

**Data Screening**

Once the survey collector was closed, the data were downloaded from SurveyMonkey into a Microsoft Excel file and the raw data file was examined for accuracy of data entry. Since respondents entered their own data, data entry errors were less of a concern than if respondents had completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires and the researcher had later entered responses into a data file. The data were checked for
Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is considered diverse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 500 students</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-1000 students</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 1000 students</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identification as Social Justice Advocate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice/Multicultural Counseling/Advocacy Course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience in School Counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-14</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
outliers and missing values. Participant entries that were missing quantitative data points were deleted. To prepare the data for analysis, data entries for each individual category and question were merged into one column.

**Quantitative Data**

The first quantitative research question, “What is the relationship between the way professional school counselors define social justice advocacy, their perceptions about advocacy actions, their knowledge and skills related to social justice advocacy, and their perceptions of advocacy obligations?” focused on identifying relationships among the four sections of the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008). Using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient allowed the researcher to evaluate the correlation (linear dependence) between the sections of the survey (Creswell, 2009). The PPMCC provides the direction of the relationship (positive or negative), the form of the relationship (linear or non-linear), and the degree and strength of the relationship. Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient is typically signified by $r$ (rho), and can take on values from $-1.0$ to $1.0$, where $-1.0$ is a perfect negative (inverse) correlation, $0.0$ is no correlation, and $1.0$ is a perfect positive correlation.

**Correlations between Sections of the Survey**

Table 2 shows significant correlations between each of the four sections of the School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008). The result of the correlation between defining advocacy (I) and advocacy action (II) was a positive, direct, and very strong relationship, $r = .797$, $N = 417$, $p < .01$, indicating that as scores for definition of advocacy increase, so do advocacy action
scores. A positive, direct, and moderately strong relationship exists between the
variables defining advocacy (I) and advocacy skills and knowledge (III), $r = .735, N = 417, p < .01$, suggesting that as scores increase on the defining advocacy scale, so do
scores on advocacy skills and knowledge. The PPMCC for defining advocacy (I) and
advocacy obligations (IV) also showed a positive, direct, and very strong relationship, $r = .770, N = 417, p < .01$, indicating a relationship between the scores on advocacy action
and advocacy obligations.

The PPMCC computed for advocacy action (II) and advocacy skills and
knowledge (III) gave an $r = .767, N = 417, p < .01$, indicating a positive, direct, and very strong relationship between the two variables. There was also a positive, direct, and very strong relationship between the variables advocacy action (II) and advocacy obligations
(IV), $r = .828, N = 417, p < .01$. The PPMCC assessed for advocacy skills and
knowledge (III) and advocacy obligations (IV) revealed a positive, direct, and very strong relationship, $r = .783, N = 417, p < .01$.

Table 2

*Pearson Correlation Matrix among School Counseling Survey Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Defining Advocacy</th>
<th>Advocacy Actions</th>
<th>Advocacy Skills/Knowledge</th>
<th>Advocacy Obligations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining Adv.</td>
<td>.797**</td>
<td>.735**</td>
<td>.770**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adv. Actions</td>
<td></td>
<td>.767**</td>
<td>.828**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills/Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.783**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**$p < 0.01$**
School Level

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine statistical significance for the research question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering the differences in school level?” An ANOVA test is appropriate when there are three or more levels of a single independent variable and provides more certainty in significance than a t-test. The ANOVA test allowed the researcher to find the average difference between the means of multiple independent groups, rather than finding the difference between two means, as in a t-test (Urdan, 2005). The results of the ANOVA were not significant, $F (3, 410) = .022, p = .996$, which indicates that the differences in the means of elementary school, middle school, high school, and P-12 schools were not statistically significant.

Years of Experience in School Counseling

In determining statistical significance for the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering years of experience in school counseling?” a one-way ANOVA was used. The ANOVA allows the researcher to find the average difference between means of multiple independent groups. Comparisons between means of the counselors with 1-3 years of experience ($M = 4.49$), 4-8 years of experience ($M = 4.40$), 9-14 years of experience ($M = 4.37$), 15-20 years of experience ($M = 4.42$), and 21 or more years of counseling experience ($M = 4.51$) were not statistically significant at $p < .05$, $F (4, 385) = 1.356, p = .249$. 
School Setting

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the research question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering school setting?” Comparisons between the rural ($M = 4.44$), suburban ($M = 4.42$), and urban ($M = 4.39$) groups were not statistically significant at $p < .05$, $F (2, 413) = .378, p = .685$, indicating that school setting has no impact on the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors.

Ethnicity

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to answer the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering ethnicity?” The results of the one-way ANOVA were statistically significant, $F (2, 396) = 5.171, p = .006$. Table 3 provides the results of the one-way ANOVA. In this study, when $p < .05$, the findings are considered statistically significant. This indicates that the mean of the dependent variable is not consistent for all groups.

To determine which groups are different from the other(s), a post-hoc Tukey test was performed (Urdan, 2005). The post-hoc Tukey test indicated that significant differences occurred between the African-American and White/Caucasian groups and between the African-American and Hispanic groups, $F (2, 396) = 5.17, p = .006$. The mean score for the African-American group ($M = 4.62$) differed significantly from the White/Caucasian group ($M = 4.40$), $p = .009$ and the Hispanic group ($M = 4.29$), $p = .021$, showing African American participants scoring significantly higher on the survey than Caucasian and Hispanic participants. The differences between the Caucasian and Hispanic groups were not statistically significant at $p < .05$. 
Table 3

*Summary of ANOVA on Average Score by Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2.095</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.047</td>
<td>5.171**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>80.209</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>82.304</td>
<td>398</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < 0.01

**Social justice/Multicultural Counseling/Advocacy Training**

A *t*-test for independent samples was conducted to answer the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy training?” The *t*-test assesses whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other. Professional school counselors who had taken a course in which social justice or multicultural counseling/advocacy was the main course objective scored significantly higher (*M* = 4.45) on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) than did those who had not taken such a course (*M* = 4.34), *t*(411) = 2.14, *p* = .03.

**Identity as a Social Justice Advocate**

A *t*-test was conducted to determine statistical significance in the groups for the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering identity as a social justice advocate?” Participants who identified themselves as social justice advocates for students scored significantly higher on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) (*M* =
4.43) than participants who did not identify as social justice advocates for students ($M = 4.29$), $t(411) = 3.81$, $p = .00$.

**Racial/Ethnic Diversity of the School**

A $t$-test was conducted for the question, “What are the differences in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors when considering the racial/ethnic diversity of the school?” Professional school counselors who identified their current school as racially/ethnically diverse scored slightly lower on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) ($M = 4.42$) than participants who did not identify their schools as racially/ethnically diverse ($M = 4.43$), $t(411) = -.341$, but this difference was not statistically significant at $p < .05$.

**Factors Influencing the Perceptions of Counselors**

A multiple regression analysis was used for the third research question, “What factors are most influential in the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors?” Multiple regression is a flexible method of data analysis that may be appropriate whenever a quantitative variable (the dependent or criterion variable) is to be examined in relationship to any other factors (expressed as independent or predictor variables) (Urdan, 2005). Using multiple regressions for data analysis allowed the researcher to determine the factors that most influence social justice advocacy perceptions in professional school counselors. The factors of ethnicity, the number of years of experience, social justice/advocacy/multicultural training, self-identification as a social justice advocate, school size and setting, the diversity of the school setting, and the gender of the participants were included in the regression. Table 4 shows the results of
the regression. Self-identification as a social justice advocate was the factor found to be most influential in this regression.

Table 4

ANOVA for the Regression of Factors Influencing Social Justice Advocacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>5.174</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.575</td>
<td>3.390**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>61.038</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66.212</td>
<td>369</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < 0.01

Qualitative Results

The qualitative research question, “What are professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy in their work?” was explored through open-ended questions. The questions were as follows:

1. How do you define social justice advocacy in the school setting?
2. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students?
3. Are you familiar with the American Counseling Association advocacy competencies?
4. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students at the client/student level?
5. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students at the school/community level?
6. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students in the public arena?

7. What do you see as the primary factor(s) prohibiting counselors from acting as social justice advocates for students and their families?

Participants who answered “no” to question 3 were directed to question 7, thus omitting questions 4, 5, & 6. Questions 4-6 were specifically designed to assess information linked to the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) and therefore not applicable to participants who were not familiar with the competencies.

**Defining Social Justice Advocacy**

The first open-ended question asked participants how they defined social justice advocacy in the school setting. It was evident from the transcripts that a counselor’s personal awareness of social justice advocacy influenced their definition of the phenomenon and their ability to act as an advocate. The predominant themes for this question included (a) awareness, (b) equity, (c) access, (d) resources, and (e) empowerment.

Many participants agreed that an important component of social justice advocacy is speaking out on behalf of students and teaching students to speak out on their own behalf. When defining social justice advocacy, participants had a tendency to focus on specific examples of advocacy behavior. Subthemes of awareness included what social justice advocacy requires as well as awareness of the needs of students. Subthemes of equity incorporated opportunities for all students, personal well-being and safety. Access to education, health services, and how counselors may be change agents in removing barriers were identified as subthemes of access. Subthemes of resources included
knowing about the existence of resources and how to access community, health, safety, and education resources. Subthemes of empowerment were identified as advocating for and advocating with students, and being a voice for students when their voices are not being heard. As one participant explained:

Social justice in a school setting is giving all students the opportunity to learn and mature in order that they achieve success after graduating. Due to certain inequities in society, opportunities for some groups and individuals must be extended, increased, and/or modified so that all children and adolescents are “playing on as equal a field as possible.” Social justice also means that students have a moral, ethical, and legal right to fair and just treatment.

Awareness was described as:

…how the school system may treat students unfairly due to socioeconomics, ethnicity, family situation, sexual orientation, and action toward equity, fairness, and empathy for all. It is my responsibility to review data, programs, and policies to determine when they reveal biased or unjust practices. I must then advocate that EVERY student have access to all our resources and has support to utilize those resources for their own success in education.

Another professional school counselor defined social justice advocacy as follows:

Identify roadblocks to success for all students, remove those roadblocks whether individual or systemic, provide the best resources as quickly as possible and as early as possible, develop resources to serve all children in the school including providing programming in multiple languages, teaching parents how to help their children, getting resources to the underserved, etc.
Participants described their efforts to promote equity, provide access, and afford resources to all students using the following strategies:

- fighting for the underdog, knowing fair is not always equal;
- helping students gain equal access to all resources and opportunities so that they can be successful;
- helping students find a voice to become their own advocates;
- helping students get all the opportunities and resources possibly available; and
- being a voice for students who have no voice.

**Acting as a Social Justice Advocate**

The second open-ended question, “How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students?” produced themes of (a) equity, (b) access, (c) resources, and (d) empowerment. Subthemes for equity included removing barriers and providing discipline and leadership in the community. It was felt that administrators and teachers lacked knowledge of social justice, oppression, and the marginalization of students and the impact these have on student achievement and opportunities in education and eventually in the workplace.

Subthemes for access included educating others at all levels in order to remove barriers for students and becoming involved in the community. Subthemes for resources included helping students access financial support, family support, and referrals to outside services. Subthemes for empowerment included being a voice for students until they are able to advocate for themselves; presenting data to local, district, and state personnel who have the power to make changes to the system; and challenging the status quo. One participant described her advocacy efforts in “working with Latino students to
ensure they understand school policies which impact them. Also, providing academic
intervention and outside resources to students and their families when they are unable to
help themselves.”

Many participants recalled advocating on behalf of students during disciplinary
hearings at school or at legal proceedings in the community. These professional school
counselors expressed their concerns about the inequities they see in the school and
community when marginalized students are accused of violating policies and/or laws.
They described their strategies for advocacy in such situations:

- attend meetings held by outside agencies, such as a counseling center or
  within the court system, to be able to advocate for a student’s educational
  position;
- students up for expulsion are where I really have to advocate, creating new
  ways that we can still help them that we have not tried; and
- advocating for alternative discipline for some of the harder-to-reach minority
  students who lack mentors and safe places to be if they are suspended from
  school.

American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies

The third question in this section asked participants if they were familiar with the
American Counseling Association advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002). Of the
366 participants who responded to this question, 61.2% (224) responded that they were
not familiar with the advocacy competencies. These participants were directed to the last
open-ended question, question 7. The 38.8% (142) of participants who were familiar
with the competencies were invited to answer three additional questions about the ACA advocacy competencies.

**Social Justice Advocacy at the Student/Client level**

The next question asked participants to describe their social justice advocacy efforts at the student/client level. While this question is similar to question 2, the difference is this question asks for a response that specifically applies to the individual student/client. The overarching themes for this question included (a) equity, (b) access, (c) resources, and (d) empowerment. Subthemes of equity included tolerance and educating others. Counselors reported the need for tolerance both in and outside the school setting. Counselors also voiced concerns about a lack of understanding of the need for social justice advocacy, and how this impedes the removal of oppressive barriers. Removing barriers was a subtheme of access and providing a voice for students was a subtheme of resources. Empowerment included subthemes of self-advocacy and resiliency. Of the 216 participant responses, 32% (69) offered examples of advocating on behalf of students, 31% (68) presented instances of advocating with students, and 37% (79) reported answers of yes or no, or other answers that were not applicable to the question.

One participant stated:

I had an ELL (English Language Learner) parent/teacher conference set up at the request of the teacher. However, once the parent was 5 minutes late, the teacher claimed there would not be enough time to discuss the issues. We met (without the teacher present) with the ELL teacher and we discussed concerns at the school. After the meeting, I found the teacher and expressed my unhappiness by
the lack of professionalism. I believe the situation was handled that way because the student was ELL. I went to administration and also shared my concerns about this particular teacher. She was disciplined and now I’m not her favorite co-worker, but that’s an uncomfortable situation that was worth it.

Other participants provided additional examples of advocacy at the student/client level, including:

- challenging current practices regarding the grading and discipline of students with disabilities or ELL students among teachers and administrators;
- making sure that a hearing officer had all pertinent, supportive information on a student before an expulsion hearing; and
- recognizing that the client/student advocate role is especially significant when individuals or vulnerable groups lack access to needed services.

**Social Justice Advocacy at the School/Community Level**

When participants were asked to describe their advocacy efforts at the school/community level, the dominant themes included (a) equity, (b) access, (c) resources, and (d) empowerment. Subthemes of equity included educating the community and teaching tolerance. A subtheme of access included removing barriers through leadership in the community. Counselors reported working with community agencies and taking leadership roles in order to better serve their students. Subthemes of resources included family involvement while being a voice for students, and teaching self-advocacy were subthemes for empowerment.

Some participants responded by reporting advocacy efforts at the student/client level and/or in the public arena, indicating a possible misunderstanding of the ACA
advocacy competencies. Fifty-four percent (111) of the professional school counselors acted as social justice advocates on behalf of students and 10% (21) acted with students. Counselors answering yes or no, or providing other answers that were not applicable to the question, made up 35% (72) of the participants.

Individual reported such advocacy efforts as:

- serving as a member of a school-wide team that makes decisions that affect all students--advocating for fair and equal treatment;
- developing alliances with groups working for change; and
- advocating for equitable access to advanced math opportunities and wider access to college preparatory information beginning in middle school.

One participant reported:

I sit on a committee that meets every other week and is comprised of members from all of the major service organizations and educational facilities in the area. We work as a team to look for solutions for individual young people in our community that have needs that may be met by one or more of the agencies that are represented in this group. The team includes members from the justice field, the human services field, the social services field, and the education field.

**Social Justice Advocacy in the Public Arena**

When the participants were asked to identify their efforts as social justice advocates in the public arena, the themes included (a) leadership and (b) providing a voice for students. Leadership included the subthemes of educating others by sharing data and textual information about student achievement and involvement at the local, state, and national levels. Subthemes for providing a voice for students included
speaking on behalf of students to community, state, and national leaders; becoming a member of local, state, and national organizations; and presenting numerical and textual data to those who have the power and authority to make systemic changes that would provide marginalized students with access to the resources they need to be successful.

Some participants provided answers to this question that were examples of social justice advocacy at the student/client or school/community level. Professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates on behalf of students in the public arena comprised 32% (58) of the participants; those acting as advocates with students made up 5% (9) of the participants; and those answering yes, no, or giving other answers that were not applicable to the question comprised 64% (113).

Participant responses included the following:

- have presented to state senate/congressional committees, state school board; talked with national legislators; served on state school superintendent's advisory committee [and] state Raising Achievement and Closing the Gap Commission; and

- ran for political office, spoke to a board member in another school district about inequities in counseling services between the two middle schools in his district.

Factors Impeding Social Justice Advocacy in the School Setting

When asked to identify the primary factor(s) prohibiting school counselors from acting as social justice advocates for students and their families, the principal themes were (a) fear, (b) lack of resources, and (c) lack of awareness, knowledge, and skills. The subthemes of fear included loss of employment, loss of status or respect, and the fear of
retribution from others both in and outside the school setting (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, etc.). While many counselors expressed an awareness of oppressive barriers, the fears they expressed about acting as social justice advocates indicated that they did not recognize their own personal power and ability to act as a change agent. Concerns about lacking knowledge of how to advocate for students without creating an adversarial relationship with others in and outside of the school were articulated by many.

Subthemes of resources consisted of a lack of adequate personnel, time, money, and training, as well as a lack of support from school officials at the local, district, state, and national levels. Many counselors described the lack of personnel and lack of time as primary concerns. Although these counselors had a desire to act as social justice advocates, they often felt they had to make difficult decisions about how to utilize their time. The lack of support from support personnel also created a barrier for counselors working to alter the status quo.

Subthemes of lack of awareness, knowledge, and skills included a reluctance to change the status quo, the abundance of non-counseling duties assigned to professional school counselors, and a general lack of understanding of the need for social justice advocacy for marginalized students and their families. One participant identified the biggest factor impeding social justice advocacy as:

Risk. Which means you also place your personal, financial, emotional, social, and physical well-being at risk. You also place yourself in a state of internal turmoil with what is right/wrong and your personal value system sometimes becomes in jeopardy. You don’t want to be/feel constantly under attack by those
who don’t care about equity and social justice for others, only their “bottom line.”

You don’t want to spend all of your time in court and you don’t want to burn out and be unable to recover. The need for advocacy far outweighs the number of counselors or hours in a day and the number of students and families each counselor can serve and meet the needs effectively or efficiently. Lastly, most administrators have no idea what counselors are supposed to do.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the quantitative and qualitative findings of the data analyses. A description of the sample and the manner in which the data were screened were also provided. One-way ANOVAs, independent t-tests, and multiple regressions were used to analyze the quantitative data attained through the School Counselor Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008). Statistical significance was found in the mean scores of professional school counselors who self-identified as social justice advocates versus those who did not. Professional school counselors who reported having taken a course in which social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy was the main objective also scored significantly higher than those who had not taken such a course. Statistical significance was also found in the scores of African American professional school counselors when compared to Caucasian and Hispanic counselors. In addition, themes of awareness, equity, access, resources, empowerment, leadership, fear, lack of resources, and lack of awareness were identified in the qualitative findings.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This chapter includes the summary of the study, significant research findings, and a discussion of the ascribed meanings of the significant findings. Based on these findings, implications for school districts, professional school counselors, and counselor education programs are discussed. Lastly, the limitations of the study and suggestions for additional research are considered.

Summary of the Study

Even though the need and high regard for social justice advocacy has been stated by numerous researchers (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Eriksen, 1999; Field & Baker, 2004; Singh et al., 2010), this study concurred with the findings of previous studies that an awareness of social injustice does not translate into action in some instances (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003). Professional school counselors, acting as social justice advocates for students and their families, have the potential to remove environmental factors that serve as barriers to student learning. As the structure of our society is transformed by world events, the gaps in the intellectual, social, personal, and emotional needs of students broaden and become increasingly complex (Orfield, 2004). In response to these changes, professional school counselors must have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to be social justice change agents for their students.

The need for social justice advocacy for marginalized students is greater today than in the past. Gateway tests at the lowest levels of our schools, increased rigor in high
school graduation requirements, highly competitive college admissions processes, and a job market in which jobs are created and become extinct over periods of months instead of years create an atmosphere of uncertainty and despair for oppressed students (NCLB, 2002; Orfield, 2004). To prepare our students for the future and give all students the opportunity to reach their potential in school and in life, professional school counselors must act as social justice advocates to change the status quo at all levels and ensure equity in education (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Lee, 2001).

As a nation, we expect that all students will receive a free and appropriate education. Calls to leave no child behind and to close the achievement and opportunity gaps for all students have created changes in accountability measures in all areas of education (NCLB, 2002). Recognizing the importance of the role of the professional school counselor in this process, the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005) created new standards for school counselors. This model, in conjunction with the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), gives professional school counselors support for systemic change in school counseling programs. Rather than continuing with a one-size-fits-all model, counseling programs must include social justice advocacy efforts to ensure the academic achievement of all students. Because counselors are in a unique position to effect systemic change both at the school/community level and in the public arena, it is crucial they have the skills and knowledge to act as social justice advocates.

The purpose of this study was to explore professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy. Using a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), this study sought to examine professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy, to explore the relationship between
these perceptions and counselors’ efforts to act as social justice advocates, and to identify factors that influence professional school counselors’ social justice advocacy efforts with and for students and their families. Through the use of a four-part survey questionnaire, a demographic questionnaire, and a series of open-ended questions, this study specifically sought to answer the question, “What perceptions do professional school counselors have about social justice advocacy for students and what factors are influential in the decisions professional school counselors make regarding social justice advocacy?”

This study examined variables associated with defining social justice advocacy, agreement with advocacy actions, and advocacy knowledge, skills, and obligations among a random sample of professional school counselors who were members of the American School Counselors Association. The results showed that the model of all demographic variables predicted the average scores on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008), accounting for 7.8% of the variance. Of all the variables, self-identification as a social justice advocate, ethnicity, and previous coursework in social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy were the best indicators and may be important in predicting professional school counselors’ desire to act as social justice advocates.

**Significant Quantitative Findings**

Significant correlations were found between each of the four sections of the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008). For each section, a positive, strong, direct relationship was found, indicating that as the score on one section of the survey increases, scores on the remaining sections will also increase. Table 5 shows the mean scores for the items on the survey.
Table 5

Mean Scores for School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Advocacy</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching students and parents about their rights and helping them to make changes for themselves that promote social justice.</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going above and beyond the status quo to assist students and their families.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting social and school reform.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a stand for families.</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working to change school and system policies and procedures that are inequitable to individuals and groups of students and their families.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing referrals and use of resources in the larger community to assist students and their families.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with community agencies that provide services to students and their families.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing parental involvement in a child's education.</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a stand for the rights of students.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting social and educational equity for ALL students.</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocacy Action</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking risks to help students and their families.</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting as a student advocate before disciplinary bodies.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting to policy making bodies the need for more school counselors.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning oneself with community agencies/professional organizations that advocate for meeting the needs of students and their families.</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening with conflict resolution skills in the event of a disagreement between groups of students within the school.</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing an inequity and taking steps to correct the problem.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing concern and altruism relative to the well-being of students.</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working to eliminate barriers and inequities affecting ALL people.</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering parents to advocate for their children.</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching students to advocate for themselves.</td>
<td>4.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 (Continued)

*Mean Scores for School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocacy Skills and Knowledge</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about advocacy models for taking action.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection and presentation of data.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of systems and subsystems and how they work in the school and greater society.</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational skills, including planning and gathering information about the issue and its resolution.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of conflict resolution and mediation strategies.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to define and assess problems.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to utilize resources within and outside of the school.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of school policies and procedures.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration - being able to maintain relationships with stakeholders.</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening skills and empathy.</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocacy Obligations</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take risks for students and their families to promote equity.</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess the risks and potential harm to students and families if advocacy actions are not taken.</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act as a resource broker within the community to help students achieve academic success.</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek professional development in improving advocacy competencies.</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide resources that expose ALL students to the world of work.</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer self-care as needed.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be aware of discriminatory practices within the school, community, and greater society.</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach out to families in the community to encourage participation in their child's education.</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain positive relationships with teachers and administrators.</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance the personal and social growth of ALL students.</td>
<td>4.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Justice Advocacy Identity

Participants who self-identified as social justice advocates for students scored significantly higher ($M = 4.45$) on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008), according to the independent $t$-test, than participants who did not identify as social justice advocates ($M = 4.10$) for students. In addition, according to the multiple regression analysis, self-identification as a social justice advocate was found to be most influential in the decisions professional school counselors make regarding social justice advocacy. These findings are consistent with the work of Singh et al. (2010), who found identity as an advocate fundamental to advocacy work in school counseling.

Ethnicity

Using a one-way ANOVA, statistical significance was found between the Caucasian and African American participants and between the African American and Hispanic participants in this study. In each case, the African American participants scored significantly higher ($M = 4.62$) on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008), indicating stronger agreement with the statements about defining advocacy, advocacy action, advocacy skills and knowledge, and advocacy obligations.

In this study, the Hispanic participants’ average score ($M = 4.29$) was lower than those of African American ($M = 4.62$) and Caucasian ($M = 4.40$) participants. It is important to note the small sample size of Hispanic participants ($n = 20$) and an outlier score from one participant (1.03) may have distorted the average score for this group ($M = 4.29$). Without this outlier score, the mean score for the Hispanic group would have been $M = 4.46$. Due to the nature of this study, outlier scores were not removed and were not a substantial factor for other subgroups.
Education and Training

Professional school counselors who had taken a course in which social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy was a main objective also scored significantly higher ($M = 4.45$) on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) than participants who had not taken such a course ($M = 4.34$). For purposes of this survey, counselors were not asked to distinguish between preservice courses, graduate courses, continuing education courses, and staff development courses.

Significant Qualitative Findings

Recurrent themes in the qualitative data included awareness, equity, access, resources, and empowerment. The voices of the professional school counselors provided specific examples of all of these concepts but most often did not use this terminology. Providing professional school counselors with the language of advocacy will enhance their ability to view their responsibilities through a social justice lens.

Defining Advocacy

When defining advocacy, professional school counselors included risk-taking, changing the status quo, and standing up for students as essential to the definition. However, when asked to identify the reasons counselors fail to act as social justice advocates, these same actions were listed as factors creating fear and limiting action. Fears reported as prohibiting factors included loss of employment, loss of status or respect, and the fear of retribution from others both in and outside the school setting (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, etc.).

In addition, counselors reported a general lack of resources, including a lack of adequate personnel, time, money, and training as well as a lack of support from school
officials at the local, district, state, and national levels. Lastly, but possibly of most
importance, professional school counselors reported a lack of awareness, knowledge, and
skills. Included in these responses was the reluctance to change the status quo due to the
lack of skills and knowledge, the abundance of non-counseling duties assigned to
professional school counselors, and a general lack of understanding of the need for social
justice advocacy for marginalized students and their families. The responses in this study
indicate that even with the best of intentions, professional school counselors will not
provide for students that which they do not have adequate education, training, resources,
and confidence to implement.

**American Counseling Association Competencies**

When asked to indicate familiarity with the American Counseling Association
advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), 61% of the participants indicated that they
were not familiar with the advocacy competencies. This provided some explanation for
the inappropriate answers given in response to the open-ended questions. The majority of
examples of social justice advocacy were of counselors acting as advocates at the
student/client and the school/community levels. This would indicate that counselors are
most familiar and most comfortable acting with and on behalf of individual students or at
the school/community levels; this finding was supported by the responses to questions
regarding the different levels of advocacy.

Of the participants responding to the question about social justice advocacy at the
student/client level, 63% provided responses appropriate to the question. When asked
about social justice advocacy at the school/community level, 65% of the responses
provided examples of advocacy appropriate to this level. However, when asked about
advocacy in the public arena, only 37% of the responses were appropriate examples of this level of advocacy. The majority of responses to the question about acting as a change agent in the public arena offered examples of social justice advocacy at the individual or school/community levels.

**Implications of Findings**

The direct, positive, and strong relationship between each of the four parts of the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) indicates a strong correlation between the parts of the survey. However, the lack of relationship between many of the demographic variables and social justice advocacy was unexpected, suggesting that gender, years of experience in counseling, school setting, size of school, level of school, and diversity of the school setting do not necessarily impact the ways professional school counselors define advocacy or their advocacy actions, knowledge, skills, or obligations.

**Defining Advocacy**

The highest score on the “Defining Advocacy” section of the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) was in regard to promoting social and educational equity for ALL students ($M = 4.66$). Taking a stand for the rights of students ($M = 4.59$) and emphasizing parental involvement in a student’s education ($M = 4.58$) also showed strong agreement among all participants. Counselors showed least agreement in response to the statements regarding teaching students and parents about their rights and helping them make changes for themselves that promote social justice ($M = 4.22$) and going above and beyond the status quo to assist students and their families ($M = 4.27$).

The level of agreement for each of these statements was supported by the answers given in response to the open-ended question asking participants to define social justice
advocacy. Many responses addressed equality and fairness rather than equity, which could indicate some misconceptions about the concept of social justice advocacy. To remove oppressive barriers for marginalized students, professional school counselors must understand the difference between equity and equality and be willing to take action for students and their families.

Advocacy Actions

On the second section of the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008), Advocacy Actions, participants had the highest scores of agreement on the statement, “Teaching students to advocate for themselves” ($M = 4.69$). This was supported by the answers participants gave to the open-ended questions about advocacy action. Counselors also responded with high agreement to the statement, “Empowering parents to advocate for their children” ($M = 4.49$).

Empowerment of students and their families was a recurring theme throughout the qualitative section of the survey. Counselors described empowerment as being a voice for students; presenting data to local, district, and state personnel who have the power to make changes to the system; and challenging the status quo both with and on behalf of students. Counselors in this study described teaching self-advocacy skills to students as an essential skill for social justice advocates. Counselors responded with the least amount of agreement to the statement, “Taking risks to help students and their families” ($M = 3.98$). This was supported in the qualitative portion of the survey by statements regarding fears of loss of employment or social status, concerns about personal safety, and a general inability to understand why the role of the professional school counselor would include taking risks for students and their families. It is not clear from this study if
these responses are due to a misunderstanding of the statement or a lack of clarity regarding how counselors take risks for students and their families.

**Advocacy Skills and Knowledge**

When responding to the advocacy skills and knowledge statements, participants reported the highest agreement to the statements regarding listening skills and empathy (\(M = 4.75\)) and collaboration – being able to maintain relationships (\(M = 4.61\)). The area reported having the least amount of agreement was “knowledge about advocacy models for taking action” (\(M = 4.20\)). Again, this is substantiated through the responses to the open-ended questions. Listening skills, empathy, and collaboration are traditional counseling skills and while these skills are important to advocacy, they alone will not provide equity, access, resources, or empowerment for students. To close the achievement and opportunity gaps in our schools, counselors must recognize the importance of advocacy models and be willing and able to implement these models with confidence and expertise.

**Advocacy Obligations**

The final section of the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) focused on advocacy obligations. Participants reported the highest agreement to the statements regarding enhancing the personal and social growth of all students (\(M = 4.69\)) and maintaining positive relationships with teachers and administrators (\(M = 4.68\)). The area of least agreement in this section of the survey was the statement regarding taking risks for students and their families to promote equity (\(M = 3.97\)).

It is of particular interest to note that the only two statements with \(M < 4.00\) involved taking risks for students and their families. Participants described their
reluctance to change the status quo and to take risks for students and their families in several ways. The primary factor reported was the participants’ view of the role of the counselor. Many counselors described their role as being limited to the school and not extending into the community or the political arena where systemic changes occur. Participants also spoke frequently of their fears associated with risk-taking for students and their families. Again, the fears reported included loss of employment, loss of status in the school or community, loss of relationships, and the loss of power or authority in the school.

**Impact of Ethnicity on Social Justice Advocacy**

The results of this study indicate significant differences between participants identifying their ethnicity as Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic. African American participants reported greater agreement with the items on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008). A statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores of African American and Caucasian participants as well as between African American and Hispanic participants. Participants identifying as African American scored higher on all subscales of this survey. In addition, these participants’ responses on the open-ended questions indicated a greater understanding of social justice advocacy for students and their families.

While the causes of these differences could be due to coursework or training, it is also possible that firsthand experiences of oppression create a greater understanding of the needs of marginalized students. Kiselica and Robinson (2001) noted that for counselors to become social justice advocates, they must develop a strong commitment to social and political change. In addition, they noted, counselors must:
identify some human condition that moves them so deeply that it inspires a personal moral imperative to make this world a better place by advocating for others in a manner that suits their personality. We are convinced that it is not possible for us as counselors to engage in genuine social action unless we discover such a personal moral imperative to serve as the driving force behind our work. (p. 396)

While the African American participants had the highest scores on survey, according to the data Hispanic participants scored lower than both African American and Caucasian participants. Due to the small sample size and the impact of one outlier score among the Hispanic participants, no conclusions will be drawn based on this data.

**School Districts**

As school districts continue to face national, state, and local mandates regarding accountability for closing the achievement and opportunity gaps, it is imperative to enlist the support of all educators. Professional school counselors are uniquely qualified to provide leadership in the area of social justice advocacy, including equity, access, and resources for marginalized students. Based on the results of this study, participants who self-identify as social justice advocates have stronger agreement with advocacy actions, knowledge, skills, and obligations, indicating a greater potential for acting as social justice change agents for students.

In addition, counselors who had taken a course in which social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy was a main objective were also more likely to act as social justice advocates for students and their families. School districts interested in employing professional school counselors who have both the willingness and capability
to advocate for students should inquire about these topics during the hiring process.

Districts seeking to increase social justice advocacy in their schools should survey their current counselors and provide staff development for counselors who lack training in the area of social justice advocacy.

School districts committed to professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates for students and their families should provide counselors with education on social justice advocacy awareness, equity, access, resources, and empowerment. Professionals are unable to implement social justice advocacy efforts without a clear understanding of these concepts. The ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) provide valuable information for counselors aspiring to become social justice advocates. Training on these competencies will improve counselors’ skills and knowledge at all advocacy levels and provide greater understanding of how advocacy actions may be implemented for students and their families. In addition, districts requiring accountability reports should add a social justice advocacy action component to better assess effectiveness.

**Professional School Counselors**

Kiselica and Robinson (2001) emphasized that social justice advocacy must be done, regardless of opposition or difficulty, because it is right. In addition, they proposed the necessity of personal experiences with injustice to create a profound commitment to social justice advocacy. Although the majority of professional school counselors in this study agree on the importance of social justice advocacy for impoverished and marginalized students, they are less willing to act as advocates by challenging the status quo.
Findings in this study are consistent with those of Bemak and Chung (2008) and Singh et al. (2010) and reveal fear as a prohibiting factor for counselors seeking to act as social justice advocates. As counselor education programs and school districts seek to train counselors to act as advocates for students, they must find ways to move counselors beyond their comfort zones. Counselors must instead move toward experiences that prompt a personal identification with the needs of students, creating the internal motivation to take actions that will close the achievement and opportunity gaps for students (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). As noted in a 2010 study, Singh et al. found that “experiences of oppression and diversity set a process into motion that can ultimately result in an individual’s commitment to actively challenging systems of oppression” (p. 22).

Counselors seeking to become social justice advocates for students and their families should seek social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy courses, continuing education through universities, or staff development through local school districts to increase personal awareness, knowledge, and skills. Such coursework provides a forum for counselors to interact with other professionals seeking to attain similar goals, while learning about social justice advocacy from a trained professional.

Professional school counselors will also benefit from reading journal articles or books that provide information for professional school counselors seeking to implement the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002). A more thorough understanding of the various levels of social justice advocacy will provide professional school counselors with a foundation to build a repertoire of social justice advocacy skills. In addition,
exposure to and familiarity with a social justice advocacy vocabulary provides counselors with the means to begin educating colleagues at the local and district levels.

**Counselor Education Programs**

The findings of this study suggest that professional school counselors who have taken a course in which social justice/multiculturalism/advocacy was the main objective score significantly higher on the School Counseling Survey (Chibbaro & Cao, 2008) than those who have not taken such a course. Counselor educator programs should take this information into consideration when planning undergraduate or graduate counseling degree programs. Providing counselors with intensive course work as well as practical application of social justice advocacy skills will enhance their ability to act as social justice advocates for students and their families. Counselor educator programs must also provide students with the language necessary to implement strategies for students, families, and schools.

Counselor education programs should consider infusing social justice advocacy and the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) into all courses, rather than teaching them in isolation in one separate, designated course. Determining which of the competencies are best suited for particular courses and how these competencies complement the multicultural counseling competencies will provide students with a comprehensive view of social justice advocacy, rather than one that is disjointed and vague. Instead of teaching students to conceptualize the components of social justice advocacy, programs should strive to teach students to operationalize social justice advocacy at all levels.
While the quantitative data in this study indicates that counselors grasp the concepts associated with social justice advocacy, the qualitative findings indicate confusion and uncertainty about implementation. Counselors need the words to communicate what social justice advocacy entails and the skills to act to remove the oppressive barriers that prevent marginalized students from achieving to their potential (Goodman et al., 2004; Lee, 1998). Encouraging preservice counselors’ involvement in professional organizations such as the American Counseling Association, the American School Counselor Association, Counselors for Social Justice, and the National Association for Multicultural Education will also enhance their potential for becoming social justice advocates.

Professional Counseling Associations

Counselors who are not familiar with social justice advocacy and/or the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis et al., 2002) should consider becoming affiliated with professional organizations such as ACA, ASCA, Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ), or the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME). Becoming affiliated with local, regional, or national organizations and associations provides professional school counselors with access to professional journals; opportunities to participate in continuing education or conferences; current information about national, regional, state, and local advocacy efforts; and opportunities to connect with other professionals in the field.

Field and Baker (2004) found that professional school counselors believed social justice advocacy was simply beyond their abilities. The counselors lacked confidence in their values, skills, and personalities related to advocacy (Eriksen, 1999). It is important for professional organizations to work together to help counselors become social justice
advocates for students. While the need for a variety of organizations is clear, it is also important for counselors to be unified through these organizations and to possess a common vocabulary and standards.

Rather than focus on their differences, organizations must come together to bring about the paradigm shift needed in the profession. If all these organizations come together to help counselors understand and implement the ACA advocacy competencies, students will begin to reap the benefits. Working together, professional associations can provide counselors with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to fully implement the ACA advocacy competencies and act as social justice advocates for students.

“Advocating for the academic success of every student is a key role of school counselors and places them as leaders in promoting school reform” (ASCA, 2003, p. 24). Through collective efforts, organizations have the means to reach school districts, counselor educators, and professional school counselors. In doing so they may become the “fifth force” in social justice advocacy, complementing the existing efforts of psychodynamic, cognitive behavioral, existential-humanistic, and multicultural forces (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009).

Limitations

One limitation of the study was that of those who received the survey, the sample was dependent upon those who chose to participate. The professional school counselors who chose to participate may have been different in significant ways from those who chose not to participate. Additionally, a participant’s understanding or interpretation of the survey items may have further limited the results of this study, as could the forced-choice answers included in the questionnaire. Self-report bias may have prevented
participants from answering truthfully, and participants may have responded in a way they believed would please the researcher rather than answering truthfully. Even though this study attempted to include a large sample size, non-response bias may have occurred because of sampling procedures. In addition, the majority of the participants were Caucasian females, whose responses may not be representative of other demographic groups. Finally, because all information was collected via the use of technology, the results do not include information about professional school counselors who do not have computer access or who lacked the technology skills to complete the survey.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Findings in this research confirm those of previous researchers who stated that professional school counselors need to act as social justice advocates in order to meet the needs of all students and counteract the oppressive barriers that hold students back (Green, McCollum, & Hays, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Further, this study substantiates that counselors who lack knowledge of social justice advocacy are unlikely to act as social justice advocates due to skill levels and environmental barriers. Bailey et al. (2003) described students as needing an advocate who can recognize oppressive barriers that occur in the educational process and who will act purposefully to find systemic measures to protect students from the system designed to educate them.

The data in this study describe counselors’ perceptions and awareness of social justice advocacy and their lack of knowledge about the levels of advocacy. However, the process of how counselors operationalize social justice advocacy remains vague. The school counseling profession will benefit from future qualitative and quantitative research
focusing on how counselors operationalize social justice advocacy at all levels and in all domains. Research to determine the level of skills and knowledge among counselors nationwide would give counselor educators insight when creating classes and developing programs in counselor education. In addition, through phenomenological studies, case studies, and ethnographies, qualitative researchers can provide detailed information on counselors who are successfully acting as social justice advocates at all levels.

The findings in this study also indicate the need to evaluate the effect of ethnicity on the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors. While this study provides limited information on this topic, a broader study using a stratified sample and including larger numbers of professional school counselors of color could provide the profession with significant information fundamental to the social justice advocacy movement. Understanding the relationship between ethnicity and social justice advocacy is vital to the counseling profession as well as to marginalized students and their families. Studies assessing groups that have experienced oppression, and evaluating the impact of these experiences on their social justice advocacy skills and actions, will help in identifying factors that contribute to social justice advocacy by professional school counselors.

Also of importance to the profession are quantitative and qualitative studies exploring the reluctance of counselors to extend their social justice advocacy efforts beyond the student/client and school/community levels and into the public and political arenas. Understanding the reasons for the reluctance counselors expressed in this study could lead to the discovery of new ways to assist counselors in becoming social justice advocates for students in the public arena.
Lastly, the results of this study identify a need for new instruments to measure the social justice advocacy actions of professional school counselors. Understanding how counselors overcome the fears and lack of support reported in this study could assist counselors in becoming change agents for students and could facilitate a paradigm shift toward social justice advocacy in the counseling profession. Research assessing the advocacy behaviors of counselors and how these behaviors fit into the role of the professional school counselor as currently defined in our schools could place social justice advocacy at the heart of the counseling profession’s mission.

Until counselors view social justice advocacy as primary to their professional role, they are unlikely to take the risks involved in advocating for students and their families. It is imperative that social justice advocacy become a core value in the counseling profession and that acting as an advocate is no longer viewed as optional for professional school counselors. Instead, counselors must become intentional in their advocacy actions and become committed to effecting systemic change that will bring about reform in our classrooms, schools, and society.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy. The study surveyed professional school counselors to investigate their perceptions about social justice advocacy and to better understand the lived experiences of professional school counselors as related to social justice advocacy in the school setting. The significant research findings of the survey and the implications of these findings were discussed in this chapter. The chapter included discussion of implications for school districts, professional school counselors, and
counselor education programs of the findings related to the social justice advocacy actions, knowledge, skills, and obligations of professional school counselors.

Recommendations for future research included exploring the impact of self-identification as a social justice advocate, the influence of professional coursework in social justice advocacy, and the effects of ethnicity on the social justice advocacy perceptions of professional school counselors. Quantitative and qualitative studies focusing on the reasons professional school counselors are reluctant to act as social justice advocates in the political and public arenas will add to the body of literature and reinforce the need for counselors to work toward systemic change in addition to acting at the student/client and school/community levels. In addition, the need for instruments to measure the social justice advocacy actions of professional school counselors is suggested.

The recognition that student success is dependent upon professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates gives credence to the efforts of the counseling profession to infuse social justice advocacy into the role and everyday actions of professional school counselors. If educators are committed to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps between majority students and their marginalized counterparts, there must also be a commitment to a paradigm shift in the role of the professional school counselor. Counselors can no longer sit at their desks waiting for students, parents, or teachers to request guidance. Instead, counselors must accept the responsibility of ensuring equity, access, and resources for all students regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, age, size, or other designation.
Although every child has the ability to succeed in school and in life, every child does not have access to the resources necessary to achieve this goal, nor do marginalized students have the same opportunities as their majority counterparts. Closing the achievement and opportunity gaps for students who are marginalized, oppressed, underserved and underrepresented requires professional school counselors to become change agents for students in schools and in the public arena. When professional school counselors have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to become social justice advocates; when they are willing and able to act accordingly; and when social justice advocacy becomes an integral component of every school counseling program; only then will this nation begin to move toward a new understanding of justice for all students.
REFERENCES


Bell, L. (1997). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), Teaching for diversity and social justice (pp. 3-16). New York: Routledge.


# APPENDIX A

## American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acting With</th>
<th>Client/Student</th>
<th>School/Community</th>
<th>Public Arena</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Client/Student</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Client/Student</td>
<td>Systems</td>
<td>Social/Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX B

Introductory Letter

Dear Professional School Counselor:

As a doctoral student at The University of Georgia, I invite you to participate in a research study entitled “Professional School Counselors and Social Justice Advocacy: Closing the Achievement Gap for All Students.” The purpose of this study is to explore professional school counselors’ perceptions about social justice advocacy in an effort to provide all students the equity, access, and resources necessary to reach their potential in school and in life.

Your voice is important to this study and the benefits of your participation include contributing to the current body of knowledge through the collection of data. The findings from this project may provide information on social justice advocacy and professional school counselors in order to close the achievement gap for marginalized students.

As a practicing school counselor, I realize the value of your time. Your participation will involve completing an online questionnaire and should take approximately 15-20 minutes. Simply click on the link below, or cut and paste the entire URL into your browser to access the survey.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GZ3H8Z5

This link will provide access to the purpose of the study, informed consent information, and the actual survey link. Thank you for your time and participation. Please keep this email for your records.

Sincerely,

Gayle Agan DuPre
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counseling and Student Personnel Services
The University of Georgia
Dear Professional School Counselor:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Pam Paisley in the Department of Counseling and Student Personnel Services at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled “Professional School Counselors and Social Justice Advocacy: Closing the Achievement Gap for All Students.” The purpose of this study is to identify the perceptions professional school counselors have about social justice advocacy for students and to determine what influences the decisions professional school counselors make regarding social justice advocacy.

Your participation will involve completing an online questionnaire and should take approximately 15-20 minutes. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate, not answer individual questions, or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. All data collected will be kept confidential and will not be individually identifiable. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. While the researcher may ensure the confidentiality of a participant by utilizing standard procedures (pseudonyms, etc.) when the researcher writes up the final research product, the researcher cannot ensure confidentiality during the actual Internet communication procedure. Because internet communications are insecure, there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed, including mechanisms to strip the IP addresses of respondents.

The findings from this project may provide information on social justice advocacy and professional school counselors in order to close the achievement gap for marginalized students. The benefits of your participation in this study include the possibility of an increased level of self-awareness with regard to social justice advocacy and this may in turn lead to increased job satisfaction. The potential benefits to society or humankind include the fact that professional school counselors who act as social justice advocates increase the likelihood of students reaching their academic and personal potential. Because there is so little data regarding this topic in the professional research, this study will add to the data about professional school counselors acting as social justice advocate for students. Additional information on this topic may lead to greater advocacy efforts and ultimately greater opportunities for success for all students.
The known risks or discomforts associated with this research are minimal and include the possibility of the participant feeling uncomfortable while answering the questions included in the questionnaire. In order to mitigate this discomfort, you may skip individual questions or discontinue the questionnaire at any time.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Gayle Agan DuPre at (678) 232-7716 or send an e-mail to gagan@uga.edu or Pamela O. Paisley at (706)542-4142 or send an email to ppaisley@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

By clicking the button below, continuing on to the questionnaire, and completing it, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Your time and participation are greatly appreciated. Please keep this email for your records.

Sincerely,

Gayle Agan DuPre
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counseling and Student Personnel Services
The University of Georgia
APPENDIX D

Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: Please indicate your answer by choosing one or more of the answers.

1) What is your gender?
   a) Female_____ 2) Male_____ 3) Other _____

2) Which of the following best identifies your ethnicity?
   a) Caucasian _____
   b) African American _____
   c) Asian/Pacific Islander _____
   d) Hispanic/Latino _____
   e) Native American _____
   f) Multiracial _____
   g) Other _____

3) How many years have you been a professional school counselor?
   a) 1-3 years ______
   b) 4-8 years ______
   c) 9-14 years ______
   d) 15-20 years ______
   e) 21-plus years ______

4) Have you ever taken a course in which social justice/multicultural counseling/advocacy was a main objective?
   a) Yes_____
   b) No_____

5) Do you consider yourself a social justice advocate for students?
   a) Yes________
   b) No________

6) What is the size of your school?
   a) Less than 500 students ______
   b) 500-1000 students ______
   c) 1000 or more students ______

7) Would you consider your school racially or ethnically diverse?
   a) No ______
   b) Yes ______
8) At which level are you a school counselor?
   a) Elementary School ______
   b) Middle/Junior High ______
   c) High School ______

9) What type of school setting do you work in?
   a) Rural ______
   b) Suburban ______
   c) Urban ______
APPENDIX E

School Counseling Survey: Advocacy for Students and Their Families

Directions: Read each of the following statements and decide how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements.

1=Strongly Disagree
2=Disagree
3=No Opinion
4=Agree
5=Strongly Agree

I. Defining Advocacy

School counselors define advocacy as:

1. Going above and beyond the status quo to assist students and their families.

2. Taking a stand for the rights of students

3. Working to change school and system policies and procedures that are inequitable to individuals and groups of students and their families

4. Supporting social and school reform

5. Promoting social and educational equity for ALL students

6. Emphasizing referrals and use of resources in the larger community to assist students and their families

7. Collaborating with community agencies that provide services to students and their families

8. Teaching students and parents about their rights and helping them to make changes for themselves which promote social justice.

9. Taking a stand for families

10. Emphasizing parental involvement in a child’s education
II. Advocacy Actions:

As a school counselor, to what degree do you believe the following are advocacy actions?

1. Recognizing an inequity and taking steps to correct the problem 1 2 3 4 5
2. Showing concern and altruism relative to the well-being of students 1 2 3 4 5
3. Taking risks to help students and their families 1 2 3 4 5
4. Empowering parents to advocate for their children 1 2 3 4 5
5. Teaching students to advocate for themselves 1 2 3 4 5
6. Working to eliminate barriers and inequities affecting ALL people 1 2 3 4 5
7. Presenting to policymaking bodies the need for more School Counselors 1 2 3 4 5
8. Acting as a student advocate before disciplinary bodies 1 2 3 4 5
9. Intervening with conflict resolution skills in the event of a disagreement between groups of students within the school 1 2 3 4 5
10. Aligning oneself with community agencies/professional organizations that advocate for meeting the needs of students and their families 1 2 3 4 5

III. Advocacy Skills and Knowledge:

The following are important for the school counselor as an advocate:

1. Ability to define and assess problems 1 2 3 4 5
2. Collaboration – being able to maintain relationships with stakeholders 1 2 3 4 5
3. Ability to utilize resources within and outside of the school 1 2 3 4 5
4. Awareness of school policies and procedures 1 2 3 4 5
5. Knowledge about advocacy models for taking action 1 2 3 4 5
6. Knowledge of conflict resolution and mediation strategies 1 2 3 4 5
7. Collection and presentation of data 1 2 3 4 5
8. Listening skills and empathy 1 2 3 4 5
9. Knowledge of systems and subsystems and how they work in the school and greater society 1 2 3 4 5

10. Organizational skills, including planning and gathering information about the issue and its resolution 1 2 3 4 5

IV. Advocacy Obligations

As a school counselor, I believe it is my obligation to:

1. Act as a resource broker within the community to help students achieve academic success 1 2 3 4 5

2. Take risks for students and their families to promote equity 1 2 3 4 5

3. Enhance the personal and social growth of ALL students 1 2 3 4 5

4. Provide resources that expose ALL students to the world of work 1 2 3 4 5

5. Assess the risks and potential harm to students and families if advocacy actions are not taken 1 2 3 4 5

6. Be aware of discriminatory practices within the school, community, and greater society 1 2 3 4 5

7. Seek professional development in improving advocacy competencies 1 2 3 4 5

8. Reach out to families in the community to encourage participation in their child’s education 1 2 3 4 5

9. Administer self-care as needed 1 2 3 4 5

10. Maintain positive relationships with teachers and administrators 1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX F

Open-ended Questions

1. How do you define social justice advocacy in the school setting?

2. What is an example of how you have acted as a social justice advocate for students?

3. Are you familiar with the ACA advocacy competencies? If so, continue. If no, skip to question 7.

4. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students at the client/student level?

5. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students at the school/community level?

6. How have you acted as a social justice advocate for students in the public arena?

7. What do you see as the primary factor(s) prohibiting counselors from acting as social justice advocates for students and their families?