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# School Counseling Faculty Perceptions and Experiences Preparing Elementary School Counselors

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# School Counseling Faculty Perceptions and Experiences Preparing Elementary School Counselors



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School counselors' job roles and preferences reportedly vary by educational level (i.e., elementary, middle and high school); however, several organizations, such as the American School Counselor Association, conceptualize and recommend school counseling practice and preparation through a K–12 lens. Little is known about how or if school counseling faculty members vary their preparation for specific educational levels. In this article, we discuss a national, mixed methods study of school counseling faculty ( $N = 132$ ) experiences and perceptions regarding school counselor preparation for the elementary level. We focused on elementary school counselors due to their unique roles. Findings included faculty's varied experiences and perceptions of differentiation, prioritizing a K–12 preparation focus, and several external factors driving their preparation such as state licensure and mandates, school counseling job opportunities, and student enrollment, motivation and interest in elementary school counseling.

**Keywords:** school counseling, elementary school, elementary school counseling, school counselor preparation, school counseling faculty

School counselors meet students' academic, career, social and emotional needs through comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012, 2014a; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). CSCPs have existed for the last 40 years and are frameworks for facilitating data-driven, student-focused, preventative, systemic and developmental school counseling services implemented in schools from preschool through 12th grade (ASCA, 2012; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). According to student reports, CSCP implementation has been associated with higher student achievement scores (Sink, Akos, Turnbull, & Mvududu, 2008; Sink & Stroh, 2003); higher student grades and a more positive school climate (Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997); and students feeling safer, having better relationships with teachers, and earning higher grades (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001). Additionally, researchers found CSCP implementation was associated with higher student math and reading achievement scores; increased college and career readiness; lower suspension, discipline and truancy rates; and higher attendance, graduation and retention rates (Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, & Skytte, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012). In summary, "when highly trained, professional school counselors deliver ASCA National Model comprehensive school counseling program services, students receive measurable benefits" (Lapan, 2012, p. 88).

Typically, school counselors are first equipped to implement CSCPs through their pre-service preparation programs. School counselor preparation, licensure and practice are often recommended as uniform across educational levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the primary counseling accrediting organization, provides school counselor preparation standards P–12 (CACREP, 2015);

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most U.S. states and territories ( $N = 43/55$ ) certify and license school counselors K–12 (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2012); and the ASCA National Model also describes their CSCP as K–12 (ASCA, 2012). However, many researchers have found differences in school counselors' reported perceptions and job activities by educational level and have highlighted the unique role of the elementary school counselor (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2009; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008; Rayle & Adams, 2008; Scarborough, 2005; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Studer, Diambra, Breckner, & Heidel, 2011).

Compared to school counselors at other educational levels, elementary school counselors reported performing and placing greater emphasis on delivering classroom lessons and curriculum (Dahir et al., 2009; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008; Rayle & Adams, 2008; Scarborough, 2005; Studer et al., 2011), counseling interventions (Dahir et al., 2009; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008; Rayle & Adams, 2008; Scarborough, 2005), and school counseling program coordination and management activities (Dahir et al., 2009; Rayle & Adams, 2008; Scarborough, 2005). Further, elementary school counselors reported a greater emphasis on personal and social development and focused less on academic and career development when compared to high school counselors (Dahir et al., 2009); spent more time on parent planning, teacher consultation and collaboration, non-CSCP activities, and CSCP implementation based on the ASCA National Model (Rayle & Adams, 2008); were the most likely level to conduct activities aligned with CSCPs (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008); and performed the least individual student planning (i.e., individual and group advisement) of all the levels (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008). Thus, despite the K–12 focus in school counselor preparation, licensure, certification and practice, school counselors reported significant differences between job activities at the elementary and secondary levels.

While much is known about differences among the educational levels, there has been little research directed toward investigating school counselor preparation by level. In this article, our research team reports the perceptions and experiences of a national sample of school counseling program faculty ( $N = 132$ ) regarding elementary level preparation and discusses potential implications and future research. The aim of this study was to gain preliminary data and provide a foundation for future in-depth research and potential advocacy. Next, we will review literature on school counselor preparation.

## **School Counselor Preparation**

General trends in school counselor preparation are sparse within the literature. School counseling faculty are members of master's- and doctoral-level school counselor preparation programs who prepare pre-service school counselors through related academic, supervision and practical experiences (ASCA, 2014b; CACREP, 2015). Examining how school counseling students are prepared, Pérusse, Poynton, Parzych, and Goodnough (2015a) published the results of a national survey of school counselor preparation programs ( $N = 131$ ) to identify trends in school counselor preparation credit hours, faculty professional experience, and course content required for school counseling students, comparing data collected in 2010 to similar data collected in 2000 (Pérusse, Goodnough, & Noël, 2001). When comparing trends in previous course offerings to those more recent, the researchers found substantial decreases in the percentage of school counseling preparation programs offering elementary (from 14.3% to 1.6%) and secondary (from 13.8% to 1.6%) school counseling specific courses (Pérusse et al., 2015a).

Next, Pérusse and Goodnough (2005) examined school counselors' perceived preparation by educational level. In this national study, school counselors ( $N = 568$ ) ranked the importance of 24

course content areas that prepared them for school counseling jobs; results included both similarities and differences in elementary and secondary school counselors' responses. Both elementary and secondary school counselors ranked the same top five course content items as most important: individual and small group counseling, parent and teacher consultation, child growth and development, and legal and ethical issues in counseling. However, elementary school counselors ranked the following course content items as having a higher importance than secondary school counselors: understanding child growth and development; theories in counseling; psychopathology, *DSM-IV* and diagnosis; play therapy; curriculum and instruction, including classroom management; individual counseling, including crisis interventions; small group counseling; consultation with parents and teachers; coordination between teachers, parents and community; classroom guidance curriculum; program evaluation and developmental needs assessment; parent education; and writing research and grant proposals. Several participants recommended distinguishing elementary from secondary school counselor preparation. In analyzing participants' anecdotal comments, researchers reported: "preparation should reflect that elementary school counseling is different from secondary school counseling" (Péruce & Goodnough, 2005, p. 115).

In contrast, Goodman-Scott (2015) conducted a national survey that examined school counselors' perceptions of their preparation and actual job activities ( $N = 1052$ ), using a modified version of the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (Scarborough, 2005). She found no significant difference by educational level in regards to participants' reported preparation or job activities. Findings from Goodman-Scott, as well as those of Péruce et al. (2015a), denote school counseling preparation and job activities could be shifting toward uniformity across K–12 settings, rather than differentiation by educational level.

## Rationale and Purpose of This Study

Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) proposed that school counselors "may receive more generic training that covers grades K through 12 and lack exposure to the differences that exist between school levels" (p. 457). However, there is very little published research on school counselor preparation by educational level. The present study was developed by members of the Elementary Advocacy Task Force for the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision School Counseling Interest Network. We sought to conduct a study to investigate the current status of elementary school counselor preparation and lay the groundwork for future research and advocacy. We collected data from a national sample of school counseling faculty regarding their perceptions and experiences preparing school counseling students for the elementary level. The following mixed methods research question guided our study: What are school counseling faculty members' perceptions and experiences preparing school counseling students for the elementary level?

## Method

Mixed method designs employ both qualitative and quantitative methods, which can provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Researchers in the past have used descriptive studies to gather preliminary data and summarize trends on under-researched areas within counseling (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Lambert et al., 2007). Further, studies often employ qualitative methods to explore a phenomenon (Hunt, 2011). Due to the lack of research on school counselor preparation by educational level, we adopted similar approaches within a convergent mixed methods design. We analyzed demographic data and descriptive closed-ended survey responses (quantitative), and performed a qualitative thematic analysis on open-ended survey responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then we used

triangulation to converge the results of all analyses, with the overall goal of expansion, increasing the depth and breadth of the study due to multiple methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). We prescribed to a social constructivist paradigm and relied heavily upon relativistic theory. Within this perspective, reality is subjective, there exists no absolute truth, and gathering multiple perspectives across sources is a research priority (Hays & Singh, 2012; Schwandt, 2007).

### The Survey

We used a Web-based survey as a low-cost, rapid-return data collection method (Fowler, 2014). Through this survey, we gathered quantitative and qualitative data: participant and program demographics, descriptive information regarding school counseling topic differentiation, and open-ended responses regarding school counselor preparation by level. All data for this study were collected via Qualtrics, a university-sponsored, Web-based survey tool. We pilot-tested the survey for content and procedures with two leaders in school counselor education (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008) and made several related changes based on their feedback.

We collected a range of participant and program demographic and background information. Specifically, we gathered participant personal and professional demographics, and background information on their preparation programs and state requirements. Further, participants reported their related opinions and preferences regarding elementary school counselor preparation.

We examined school counseling faculty members' perceptions of their differentiation of topics for elementary school counseling using 24 descriptive items. On the survey, we defined differentiation as school counselor preparation programs tailoring or modifying school counseling topics and program requirements, such as academic advisement and internship, respectively, by educational level (i.e., elementary, middle or high school). Based on the literature and national foci, we created these 24 items based on topics that elementary school counselors frequently conducted and current school counseling trends. These 24 descriptive items were two-part questions in which participants responded using two 5-point Likert scales: one to report their *current* level of differentiating each topic for elementary school counseling (0 = no current differentiation; 4 = highly differentiated; n/a = not applicable), and the second to communicate their *preferred* level of differentiating topics for elementary school counseling (0 = no differentiation; 4 = high differentiation; n/a = not applicable). Lastly, participants responded to open-ended questions regarding their perceptions and experiences pertaining to school counselor preparation by level.

### Data Collection and Procedures

We solicited participants after obtaining approval from the primary researcher's university institutional review board and recruited participants through several e-mail lists and professional contacts. For instance, we e-mailed the following individuals and organizations approximately twice, requesting they complete and distribute the survey to their membership: (a) the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision national and regional leadership, as well as the corresponding School Counseling Interest Network; (b) the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv; (c) professional school counseling faculty contacts; and (d) counselor educators listed in the American School Counselor Association online membership directory. Our e-mail solicitations included a description of the participation criteria and study, informed consent, participants' rights, researchers' contact information and a survey link.

After closing the survey, we cleaned the data, including participants who met the inclusion criteria: participants who (a) identified as full-time school counseling faculty in the United States whose job

description included teaching and supervising students in school counseling master's programs, (b) completed 90% or more of our survey, and (c) agreed to the informed consent. Regarding survey completion, 271 participants started the survey, 192 completed the survey, and 132 met the inclusion criteria. We were unable to calculate a response rate due to the unknown number of individuals who received the request and were eligible for participation.

### Participants

Participants were 74% female and 26% male. Their races and ethnicities included: 85% Caucasian, 4% African American, 3% Latino and 2% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 2% self-identified as multi-ethnic. Participants worked in 37 different states within the United States, representing all regions (19% West, 24% Midwest, 32% South and 25% Northeast).

Ninety-eight percent of the participants had earned a doctorate; doctorates included counselor education (64%), counseling psychology (11%), and either doctorates in educational leadership, educational psychology or clinical psychology (22%). Fifty-three percent of participants earned their doctorates from CACREP-accredited programs. Many participants described previously working as a full-time school counselor (94%), while approximately 63% of participants reported that either they, or another full-time school counseling faculty member in their program, had paid work experience as an elementary school counselor. Lastly, most participants (94%) believed school counseling professional organizations should advocate for elementary school counselors to be mandated in every state. In Table 1 we list additional reported participant, program and state information.

**Table 1**

#### *School Counseling Program Demographics*

School Counseling Program Demographics	%
Require Clinical Experience at All Three Educational Levels	31
Clinical Requirements Are Based Upon State Certification/Licensure Standards	83
Group Supervision Is Separated by Educational Level	15
Internship Group Supervision with Other Counseling Specialties [e.g., mental health]	26
Program Has a Concentration for Students Who Desire to Be Elementary SC	15
State Mandates Elementary School Counselors	27
K-12 Certification/Licensure	86
Program Meets State's School Counseling State Certification/Licensure Requirements	100
Program Is Accredited by CACREP	66
ASCA National Model Is Taught	93

### Data Analysis

As is common with convergent mixed methods studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010), our data analyses involved independently analyzing each type of data (demographic and descriptive) and conducting the qualitative thematic analysis. We then merged the data in the interpretation. We concurrently organized demographic data and analyzed descriptive data using Microsoft Excel 2013

to examine participants' reported current and suggested differentiation of school counseling topics for elementary school counseling.

Simultaneously, we also analyzed the open-ended survey data through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) methodology to analyze participants' perceptions and experiences related to elementary school counselor preparation. Scholars have described TA as an independent method and a "flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). Braun and Clarke outlined TA as a six-step process to identify, analyze and report qualitative data, including: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) creating initial codes through systematically coding the data, (3) developing initial themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) creating a corresponding research report. We began TA by first becoming familiar with and immersing ourselves in the data—reading and re-reading the content, discussing our overarching reactions, and deciding on data analysis within the TA framework. Next we, the four members of the research team, each independently open coded the data (Creswell, 2013) and compared our results through consensus coding (Hays & Singh, 2012). During in-depth research meetings over the span of several months, we engaged in the iterative and consensual process of creating, defining and reviewing codes and themes until reaching consensus, or agreement between all team members. During this analysis, we used several TA strategies: theoretical theme development (i.e., analysis driven by the research question), a semantic approach (i.e., codes created from the data—we analyzed the concrete words/descriptions), and utilizing an essentialist-realist method to communicate participants' realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concurrent with the last stage of TA, we discussed our results and created this manuscript.

Lastly, we used data triangulation to compare several survey data sources. For instance, we triangulated demographics and background information, descriptive data and qualitative TA results to gain information about varied aspects of elementary school counselor preparation and create a more multifaceted understanding of the specified phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). Overall, triangulation "is both possible and necessary because research is a process of discovery in which the genuine meaning residing within an action or event can best be uncovered by viewing it from different vantage points" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 298).

### **Strategies for Trustworthiness**

We used a myriad of trustworthiness strategies to strengthen rigor of the qualitative thematic analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). First, we utilized investigator triangulation to analyze data through many in-depth collaborative research meetings over the span of several months (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012), and we engaged in consensus coding—intercoder agreement through verbally reaching shared agreement on codes and themes (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). Next, we created an audit trail to document our data analysis and research processes (Hays & Singh, 2012; Schwandt, 2007), and enlisted an external auditor who reviewed our codes, themes and data analysis to provide feedback and confirm systematic data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). We participated in research team discussions at the start of and during data analysis to identify and bracket our assumptions and researcher biases (Schwandt, 2007).

**The research team.** A crucial component of the methodology was the establishment of the research team (Creswell, 2013). The research team was comprised of four individuals who met regularly for 2 years as part of the Elementary Advocacy Task force for the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision School Counseling Interest Network. This research project was initiated as part of the named task force. All authors were counselor educators and had previous school counseling experience. Specifically, the first author completed 2 years as a counselor educator and 3 years as a

school counselor; the second author was a counselor educator for 8 years and a school counselor for 14 years; the third author was a counselor educator for 7 years and had 5 years of school counseling experience; and the fourth author had 12 years of experience as a counselor educator and 4 years of experience as a school counselor. The first three authors identified as Caucasian of European descent and had previous elementary school counseling experience; the fourth author identified as multi-ethnic (Caucasian of European descent and Native American) and had experience as a secondary school counselor. Additionally, the primary author was a female in her mid-30s; the second author was a female in her mid-40s; the third author was a male in his 40s; and the fourth author was a female in her mid-50s. We utilized the research team to challenge each other's assumptions and biases during data analysis, as well as engage in researcher triangulation.

## Results

In this study, we examined school counseling faculty members' perceptions and experiences regarding school counselor preparation for the elementary level. To examine the research question, we triangulated three data sources: demographic and background information, descriptive data (Table 2), and qualitative thematic analysis results. Three themes resulted from the data analysis: *Varying Conceptualizations of Differentiation*, *K–12 Preparation Focus* and *Factors Driving Elementary School Counseling Preparation*. We will subsequently describe the themes and provide the results of the triangulation.

**Table 2**

*School Counseling Faculty's Highest Five Means and Lowest Five Means for Perceived Current and Preferred Differentiation of Elementary School Counseling Topics*

Current Elementary School Counseling Topic Differentiation	M	SD	Preferred Elementary School Counseling Topic Differentiation	M	SD
<b>Highest Five Items</b>			<b>Highest Five Items</b>		
Classroom Lessons	2.62	1.38	Classroom Lessons	3.26	1.03
Social/Emotional Issues	2.50	1.46	Career Exploration	3.20	1.20
Human Growth and Development	2.48	1.62	Human Growth and Development	3.05	1.37
Career Exploration	2.41	1.51	Classroom Management Techniques	3.04	1.89
Creative Counseling Techniques	2.37	1.41	College Readiness	3.02	1.22
<b>Lowest Five Items</b>			<b>Lowest Five Items</b>		
Educational Policies (Federal and State)	1.36	1.34	Educational Policies (Federal and State)	2.01	1.50
Professional Identity	1.24	1.40	School Counselor Leadership	1.90	1.58
School Counselor Leadership	1.19	1.38	Professional Identity	1.80	1.57
Cultural Competency	1.18	1.40	Social Justice/Advocacy	1.73	1.58
Social Justice/Advocacy	1.09	1.34	Cultural Competency	1.69	1.60

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Perceived Current Differentiation of Elementary School Counseling Topics items: 0 = no current differentiation; 4 = highly differentiated. Perceived Preferred Differentiation of Elementary School Counseling Topics: 0 = no differentiation; 4 = high differentiation.

### Varying Conceptualizations of Differentiation

Participants described their perceptions and experiences regarding the differentiation of school counseling preparation through descriptive and open-ended qualitative data. In looking at the *current*



and *preferred* descriptive items, participants ranked the degree to which they were currently and preferably differentiating school counseling topics for elementary school counseling, using a 0–4 point scale (0 = no differentiation and 4 = high differentiation). Participants' *current* differentiation means were fairly moderate to low (means ranged from 1.09–2.62), meaning participants perceived providing little to average elementary school counseling topic differentiation. At the same time, participants communicated differences between their current level of differentiation and their preferred level of differentiation (*preferred* means ranged from 1.69–3.26). For example, participants' means for each *preferred* item were higher than the means for each *current* item. Thus, participants reported low to moderate differentiation for the elementary level, but desired to differentiate elementary school counseling content to a greater degree than they were actually doing. Further, participants reported conducting and desiring greater differentiation among practical or application-based topics (e.g., developing classroom lessons, addressing social and emotional issues) compared to theoretical or philosophically geared topics (e.g., professional identity, cultural competency).

Through the open-ended responses, participants described their perceptions of and experiences with differentiating school counselor preparation for educational levels. For example, one participant described a practicum experience specific to the elementary level:

Our program adopted a K–5 charter school who has no school counseling services. We . . . provided supervised classroom lessons pre-practicum in this elementary school. . . . The experience has been phenomenal for my students to learn about developmentally appropriate classroom management, curriculum design, lesson planning and delivery, as well as the social-emotional needs of kids.

Another participant described differentiation as modifying class discussions according to level: "The discussion in a class will of course be different depending on the level being addressed." A different participant described differentiation occurring for assignments, based on students' interests, yet also provided an alternative strategy for viewing the concept of differentiation:

Students can often tailor assignments so that they are most relevant to the [desired] level(s). . . . Readings that have to do with specific levels are generally required for everyone [because] . . . it's good to know what's happening at other levels. I wonder if differentiation is what's called for or if instead, inclusion and gauging the needed depth of exposure and skill?

A separate participant conceptualized differentiation as, "separate courses by level or that the instructor differentiates within the course by providing examples or options for various levels." Yet, another participant described differentiation within the context of school counseling compared to other counseling tracks such as mental health counseling: "I have seen programs with 'concentrations' by which students take only one standalone course in SC [school counseling], MH [mental health], CC [college counseling] and the rest of the program is generic counseling." Overall, participants' responses to open-ended questions revealed varying conceptualizations and the implementation of differentiation.

### **K–12 Preparation Focus**

Through demographic data and open-ended responses, participants relayed exposure to and a preference for using a K–12 focus when preparing school counseling master's students. First, the majority of participants conveyed graduating from a CACREP-accredited doctoral program (53%) and current employment in a CACREP-accredited school counseling master's program (66%). Nearly all participants reported teaching the ASCA National Model in their preparation program (95%). Additionally, most participants (86%) reported working within states with K–12 school counseling

certification and licensure, and all (100%) participants' preparation programs met their states' certification and licensure requirements.

Through open-ended responses, several participants also described preferring and implementing a K–12 focus in preparing school counseling students. One participant said:

I think we are doing a disservice to our SC graduate students if we specialize too much during their master's programs. It is important that they really understand the full range of developmental challenges and educational transitions so they can best collaborate across a comprehensive K–12 SC program.

Further, another participant stated: "Clearly there are level differences, but comprehensive programming needs to be K–12 and counselor education programs need to teach as such." A different participant described:

I like that we prepare our students for elementary and secondary levels. This gives them the confidence to work at all levels once they graduate. I also think that training across levels is important to promote vertical articulation in school counseling programs and services.

Within the K–12 school counseling focus, participants valued some topic differentiation for elementary school counseling to reflect the unique components of that level. For example, two participants described the distinct differences between levels within a K–12, unified professional identity:

In our state, our students earn a K–12 certification. . . . We try to do the best job we can in preparing students for working at ALL levels. . . . There are some areas where we need to provide specific differentiated knowledge or skills just for elementary-age, but there are many things that cut across all levels (e.g., strong collaboration, teaching, listening, meeting facilitation, student advocacy, partnering skills and clear sense of school counselor identity, professional advocacy, comprehensive planning).

Another participant suggested providing a unified professional identity overall, despite some differentiation for each level:

The expectations . . . and the emphasis on specific roles, skills are different [for each level], and that needs to be addressed. . . . At the same time, too much differentiation can lead to more splintered identity and a less general skills set, which in the long run may not serve our graduates or their students well. [We are] striving for a balance of knowledge, skills and supervision that is level-specific with enough breadth of experience to solidify a professional identity.

### **Factors Driving Elementary School Counseling Preparation**

Through open-ended responses and demographic data, participants described various drivers or influencing elements that impacted their decisions and beliefs regarding elementary school counselor preparation. Examples of drivers included state licensure and mandates; school counseling job opportunities; and student enrollment, motivation, and interest in elementary school counseling. According to participants, several external drivers impacted their school counseling preparation.

Several participants conveyed that various state licensing requirements and mandates influenced

their elementary level preparation. For example, the majority of participants (86%) reported their state certified or licensed school counseling K–12, and all participants (100%) identified that their preparation programs met the state certification or licensure requirements. Thus, most participants' school counselor preparation was driven by their state's K–12 certification and licensing requirements. Several participants echoed these sentiments in their open-ended responses, including: "The certificate [is] K–12 so students must be prepared for all levels," and "When I first started teaching about 13 years ago, there seemed to be a greater differentiation in levels. But within our state over the past year, the cert has moved to a PK–12, which better aligns with ASCA model roles and functions."

Next, most participants' states (70%) did not mandate elementary school counseling; thus, many participants did not feel they could prioritize elementary school counselor preparation. One participant stated: "Elementary school counselors are not required [in my state]." Another participant noted, "but for those of us in states with no mandate for ESC [elementary school counseling] positions, it's [focusing on elementary school counseling] not feasible."

Participants further described school counseling job availability as a driving force in their elementary school counselor preparation. A participant said, "we cannot offer courses specific to level based on the limited opportunities for elementary school counselors in our state," and "[it] would be hard to justify an elementary school counseling focus in my program . . . locally few school districts have them [elementary school counselors]." Similarly, another participant stated: "Our students get 90% of their jobs in high schools." Thus, participants may focus little on elementary school counseling due to the lack of available jobs.

Additionally, job availability and student interests were co-mingled driving forces. Some participants described implementing a K–12 focus in order to expose their students to a range of levels, in the event they cannot secure a job at their desired level. According to one participant:

Frequently, students leave our program hoping to work at a particular level but due to job scarcity in the region where they chose to live, they need to obtain a job at a different level. Sometimes they end up loving the level where they end up even though it was not their first choice.

Another participant mentioned: "I find that some of our students don't necessarily go on to work at the level they interned at (or thought they would work at) and [the students] indicate they benefitted by being in courses that address all levels."

According to several participants, student interest in pursuing jobs at the elementary school level was low and offering courses specific to preparing the elementary school counselor was not feasible. According to one participant: "We cannot offer courses specific to level based on enrollment issues." Other participants stated the following: "We have a small program so we would not be able to offer classes for specific levels of school counseling practice," and "We also have very few students interested in elementary. For some reason, only about two students or less tend to be interested in elementary every year. Most prefer secondary." According to participants, students' preferences were driving forces in school counselor preparation programs' elementary school counseling focus. Generally speaking, participants' decisions and preferences regarding elementary school counseling differentiation and preparation were influenced by the driving factors, or contextual realities, associated with certification and licensure, state mandates, job availability, and student interests.

## Discussion

The school counseling faculty in our study reported conducting and preferring a K–12 focus in preparing school counselors, which is similar to preparation standards, certification and licensure requirements, and suggested school counseling job activities (ACA, 2012; ASCA, 2012; CACREP, 2015). The K–12 school counseling preparation focus in this study also is consistent with findings from recent studies from Pérusse et al. (2015a) and Goodman-Scott (2015), in which participants reported little difference in preparation by educational level. Thus, despite school counselors in several studies reporting differences in job activities and perceptions by level, school counseling preparation programs may incorporate a K–12 focus.

However, within a K–12 preparation focus, participants did see the necessity for differentiating certain educational topics to the elementary school level more than others. The highest means for *current* and *preferred* differentiation items included classroom lessons, classroom management techniques, social and emotional issues, human growth and development, career exploration, and creative counseling techniques. In comparison with the literature, school counselors at the elementary level report performing classroom instruction and management more often than school counselors at the secondary level (Dahir et al., 2009; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008; Rayle & Adams, 2008; Scarborough, 2005; Studer et al., 2011). Additionally, Dahir and colleagues (2009) reported that elementary school counselors spend more time on personal and social development as compared to their secondary counterparts. Furthermore, Pérusse and Goodnough (2005) found that elementary school counselors placed more priority on human growth and development and creative counseling techniques, such as play therapy, than secondary school counselors. Differentiating topics specific to career exploration and college readiness suggest that the participants believed these topics to be developmental, or K–12 in nature. A developmental perspective related to college and career counseling is widely discussed within the school counseling literature (Gysbers, 2013; Pérusse, Poynton, Parzych, & Goodnough, 2015b; Trusty & Niles, 2004). For instance, the College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (2010) differentiates college and career readiness objectives by educational level with a strong focus on career exploration at the elementary level, where high school counseling attends to college admission and post-secondary transition to college. In addition to a career exploration, Trusty, Mellin, and Herbert (2008) contended that elementary school counselors should focus on building caring school cultures and increasing opportunities for family engagement as part of the college and career focus.

Content topics that participants perceived as requiring little differentiation at the elementary school level were the professional skills and knowledge associated with leadership, cultural competency, social justice and advocacy, professional identity, and knowledge of federal and state policies. Hence, the school counseling faculty in our study conducted and suggested less differentiation for broad, philosophical topics often addressed in the literature as spanning K–12. For example, within the ASCA National Model (2012), leadership, social justice and advocacy are addressed within a K–12 framework for program implementation. The most recent version of the ASCA National Model (2012) does not distinguish the role responsibilities of elementary school counselors differently than the secondary level. Additionally, within school counseling literature, professional identity (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Konstam et al., 2015), leadership (Mason, 2010), social justice and advocacy (Ratts, Dekruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007) and cultural competency (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010) are not discussed specific to the role responsibilities of counselors at different educational levels.

Not only did participants express differentiating some educational topics, but through their open-ended responses they conveyed varied perceptions of and experiences with the overall differentiation construct, including differentiating class discussions and assignments, specific courses, practical experiences, and differentiating school counseling courses from other counseling tracks, such as mental health counseling. The examination of the school counseling preparation differentiation construct has been nearly nonexistent in the literature. The results of this study demonstrate initial insight to school counseling faculty's perceptions and experiences regarding differentiation and the need for further related research.

Lastly, according to the school counseling faculty in our study, their preparation was driven by several external factors. Participants described their desire and actions to prepare school counseling students for all educational levels, K–12, which was often driven by K–12 state licensure and certification requirements. However, due to a lack of state-level elementary school counseling mandates, as well as limited job opportunities and student enrollment and interests, many school counseling faculty expressed concerns with and a lack of focus specifically on elementary school counselor preparation. In light of these external forces, it appears that the preparation of elementary school counselors may be less prioritized within a K–12 focus. Similarly, with the heightened national focus on college and career readiness, including the Reach Higher (The White House, n.d.) and Race to the Top (U. S. Department of Education, 2016) initiatives, and increased emphasis on college application rates, we wonder if elementary school counseling could be de-emphasized in national school counseling conversations.

## **Future Research and Implications**

This study provided preliminary data on school counseling faculty members' perceptions of and experiences with preparing school counselors for the elementary level. The most substantial implication is our hope that this study will provide a springboard for future research, which may inform teaching and advocacy. First, we suggest future studies utilize qualitative interviews to gain in-depth information regarding school counseling faculty processes and conceptualizations of differentiation in pre-service school counseling preparation. Researchers also could develop an instrument to measure differentiation in school counselor preparation to better understand the construct and its application. Further, more research is needed to examine the impact of external drivers and how school counseling faculty and preparation programs address such external drivers, including state-level school counseling mandates, job opportunities and national initiatives. Specifically, how do these external drivers influence school counseling preparation, practice and policy? Finally, future research can examine school counselor preparation for all levels. For instance, are certain levels prioritized within a K–12 focus?

This study also contains interesting implications for teaching and advocacy. Our findings suggest that many school counselor preparation programs wrestle with preparing students for aspirational practice versus preparing students for the realities of the field. Research shows the benefits of implementing a school counselor-run CSCP from kindergarten through graduation; however, there are many barriers to doing so. School counseling faculty must teach students best practices and cultivate their professional identity, while also preparing students to navigate the current educational climate and advocate for systemic change, bridging the gap between ideal and real school counseling. Further, school counseling faculty also must advocate for systemic change, supporting state-level mandates requiring school counselors at all levels and ensuring that national school counseling conversations and initiatives are inclusive of a K–12 focus.

## Limitations

We identified several study limitations. Web-based surveys reach a limited sample due to the need for e-mail addresses (Fowler, 2014), and e-mail solicitations may be undeliverable due to e-mail filters (Dillman et al., 2008). We attempted to mitigate these concerns by soliciting participants through various school counselor education outlets. Next, we enlisted a convenience sample, and participants may have been motivated to complete the survey due to their interests and experiences; thus, our sample is not necessarily representative of all school counseling faculty across states. At the same time, the goal of this study was not to generalize findings but to gather exploratory data to guide future inquiry. Lastly, despite providing a definition of differentiation in the survey, participants expressed differing views on this construct, which turned out to be one of our primary themes.

## Conclusion

Scholars have shown that students benefit from fully implemented CSCPs, which are facilitated at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Elementary school counseling is a crucial foundation of K–12 school counseling, especially in regard to proactive prevention activities for all students. Thus, school counseling students should be prepared for school counseling across all three levels. While little research has been conducted on differentiating school counselor preparation for the three levels, this study provides findings regarding school counseling faculty's perceptions and experiences differentiating preparation for the elementary level, finding varying conceptualizations of differentiation, a K–12 preparation focus generally with some differentiation of school counseling topics, and factors driving elementary school counseling preparation. While more research is needed to further examine and expand on our study, there also exists a need to take stock of these preliminary findings. Participants reported several barriers to school counseling preparation at the elementary level. School counselors and school counseling leaders must investigate and advocate for the role and existence of the elementary school counselor to ensure that K–12 school counseling truly remains K–12, and that all students in K–12 can be served by a school counselor.

### *Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure*

The authors reported no conflict of interest or funding contributions for the development of this manuscript.

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