VIRTUAL SCHOOL COUNSELING AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

Tawonda M. Hunter

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT

School counselors work with students and families to remove or minimize social, emotional, and academic barriers to education. In a traditional setting, school counseling can be rewarding yet not without obstacles. These obstacles or challenges are compounded when variables like role changes, shifts in the work setting, and a pandemic are present. This phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. The phenomenological theoretical framework by Edmund Husserl was the theory guiding this study. This theoretical framework helped provide a rich description of school counselors' lived experiences working virtually amid COVID-19. It provided insights into challenges faced as school counselors attempted to meet their students' social and emotional needs in a virtual setting and their perceptions and attitudes regarding their lived experience with virtual school counseling. The study employed snowball sampling to recruit elementary school counselors employed in Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school counselors' notes. The findings of this study will fill in the gap of limited qualitative research in the counseling profession. There were five themes and eight subthemes that emerged from this study. The themes/subthemes were adaptability/role and program delivery, social emotional learning (SEL), communication/parents, technology/devices, internet accessibility and training, and engagement/staff attendance and student attendance and participation.

Keywords: phenomenology, virtual/online school counseling, elementary school counselors, COVID-19 pandemic

Dedication

This publication is dedicated to the "wind beneath my wings", my loving and supportive family. My husband, Marcus, our children, Tianna, Tyrese and Marcus, Jr., my grandparents, Willie and Marie, Robert and Frances, and my mom, Billie aka G-Mom. In more ways than one, you all have inspired me and encouraged me to aim high and reach my goals. It is because of your unwavering support that I am able to complete this work. I love you all! To God be the glory!

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List of Abbreviations

American School Counseling Association (ASCA)

Attention Deficient and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Georgia School Counselor Association (GSCA)

National Association of School Nurses (NASN)

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP)

Social emotional learning (SEL)

Student Support Team (SST)

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Georgia Crisis Access Hotline (GCAL)

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

School Counselor Use of Time Analysis (SCUTA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter one will provide a framework for the proposed research study. In this chapter, the historical, social, and theoretical contexts for the problem will be revealed along with the researcher's motivation for conducting the study through the situation to self. In addition, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, a list of definitions, and a concise summary will be provided. Throughout the study, the terms virtual and online will be used interchangeably.

Background

America's children deserve the absolute best that we have to offer them. In times of distress and uncertainty, school counselors have a charge to continue to provide adequate and effective services to students. Amid the sudden school closures caused by COVID-19, school counselors are forced to work in unfamiliar territory. As they do so, little guidance or literature exists to help shape the new normal processes. This research will provide practical knowledge for them and enhance their skillsets.

Historical

In the early 1900s, vocational guidance was used for what we know today as school counseling (Gysbers, 2010; Wimberly & Brickman, 2014). Vocational guidance was performed by school administrators and teachers to provide a sense of direction for students in terms of careers and jobs. Originally, this was the primary role of school counseling to provide career guidance. Researchers in the field noticed a change in the need for counseling services. The shift occurred during the 1960s to focus more on mental health in the school setting (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). This setting occurred at a brick and mortar structure.

As the growing need for mental health services in the school setting surfaced, the need for highly skilled individuals to address these needs increased. School counselors are perfectly positioned to tackle these critical student needs due to their extensive training, knowledge, and skillset in mental health. School counseling has evolved into a comprehensive counseling program rather than a guidance position (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014). A key component of any comprehensive counseling program regardless of the school level, such as elementary, middle, or high, is the essential need to address all students' social and emotional needs appropriately.

Social

In the United States of America, many mental health challenges are present in the nation's schools.   Children ranging from ages 2-17 years have been diagnosed with attention deficient and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) at a rate of 9.4%, which is approximately 6.1 million (CDC, 2020). In addition, the CDC reported the following for children ranging from 3-17 years of age (a) of approximately 4.5 million (7.4%) have been diagnosed with a behavior problem disorder, (b) approximately 4.4 million (7.1%) have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and (c) approximately 1.9 million (3.2%) have been diagnosed with a depression disorder. Subsequently, the rate of prevalence tends to be high regarding mental health issues among school-aged children. A mixed-methods study conducted by Debose (2008) revealed that peer relationships, ADHD, anxiety, and low self-esteem are among the most prevalent mental health conditions identified in schools. School counselors are trained as mental health professions in the school setting to assist students with these conditions.

Presently, school counselors, educators, and mental health professionals find themselves in a rather peculiar situation. Earlier this year, school counselors were involuntarily shifted from providing services in a traditional setting into a virtual setting. Although school counseling

services have been rendered online for decades, this pales in comparison as this transition was due to an unforeseen pandemic (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2020). Counselors and students accustomed to attending school in a traditional setting now have to manage in a virtual world. As they construct a new normal of what education and mental health services look like amid the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, they are faced with a plethora of challenges and uncertainties. In a quest to navigate these turbulent times, these practitioners must regroup and redefine their chosen methods while holding to school counseling's core mission and vision. As a result of this shift, not only do school counselors suffer, but also the students and families. This study's sample population consists of elementary school counselors identified through the Georgia School Counselors Association (GSCA) and/or the elementary school counselors Facebook page.

Theoretical

Unfortunately, there is limited qualitative literature addressing virtual school counseling, specifically during a national pandemic. COVID-19 is something that has not been experienced before now. Concerning this pandemic, "there is a lot to learn. At this point, there are no experts in the field. We have not dealt with a pandemic for a long time" (van der Kolk, 2020, 4:45). This study will add to the research in this area by providing an understanding of this phenomenon. Although this study is conducted with a group of elementary school counselors, it can benefit all school counselors regardless of the work setting. As researchers and professionals continue to explore virtual school counseling amid COVID-19, the study will offer significant future research implications.

Situation to Self

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers bring to the study their own beliefs and views as well as their personal history. Positioning oneself in the study helps to explore any philosophical assumptions one may bring to the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am employed as an elementary school counselor in Georgia. My position motivates me to conduct this study to add to virtual school counseling knowledge and literature during a pandemic. The epistemological assumption is the philosophical belief associated with the study, which addresses how reality is known. It is a method by which we can explain and understand what we know. What we do know is that we do not know. We have the metacognition about this and in doing so we can search for ways to solve a problem. The paradigm that will guide the study is social constructivism. The researcher seeks to understand the participants' lived experiences surrounding COVID-19. This is what we do not know. In social constructivism, individual experiences shape reality, constructed among the researcher and the study subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism will help us understand the realities of the situation with students' interactions during COVID-19.

Problem Statement

School counseling has evolved over the years as the profession has grown. Initially, school counseling was considered helpful in the efforts of helping with vocational counseling. As the job description has changed, school counseling has transformed from a position to a program (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014). Because of this, the transition has not always been smooth. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) has done much work to help conceptualize school counseling in the k-12 school system. The work ASCA has done is good in concept but in times of COVID-19, it was not initially validated. Traditionally, school counselors are hired to

work with students in elementary, middle, and/or high school settings. Most school counseling preparatory master's programs prepare future counselors for work in one of these settings. According to ASCA (2017), "school counselors have the responsibility to provide a school counseling program and develop programs to support all students in academic, career, and social/emotional development that would emulate school counseling that would take place in a face-to-face environment" (p. 2). The global pandemic, COVID-19, has caused a shift in that framework and mode of delivery because we have little to no experience in working with students who have been profoundly affected by COVID-19.

COVID-19 has caused the diversion of all educational and related services to an online platform. As this is uncharted territory for most educators, including school counselors, a new way of delivering services has been forced upon us. Although some virtual schools existed before COVID-19 and some school counselors may have had that experience, this is not the norm for most school counselors working in a public school setting, especially a Title I setting. Naturally, this demanded a new learning curve for many school counseling professionals that have not been studied before. While "counselors understand the additional concerns related to the use of distance counseling, technology, and social media and make every attempt to protect the confidentiality and meet any legal and ethical requirements for the use of such resources" (Corey et al., 2015, p. 545), virtual counseling may still present challenges for many. Therefore, identifying a gap in the literature is present. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of elementary school counselors working virtually during the pandemic, how they could meet their students' social and emotional needs, and their perceptions of virtual school counseling.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. At this stage in the research, virtual school counseling will be generally defined as implementing a school counseling program through technology and distance counseling (ASCA, 2017). The theory guiding this study is a phenomenological theoretical framework by Edmund Husserl. It helps to provide a rich description of the lived experiences of school counselors working virtually amid COVID-19.

Significance of the Study

As qualitative literature is extremely limited in the counseling field, this study will add to the body of research and credibility of such studies (Heppner et al., 2016). Although there have been a few qualitative studies conducted regarding virtual or online counseling (Mallen et al., 2005; Molnar et al., 2013), there are no studies related to virtual school counseling or virtual professional counseling during a pandemic. Seidel's et al., (2020) research explored the role college counselors played in helping students' needs during COVID-19. College counseling centers are assumed to play a vital role in addressing students' mental health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) spoke to the impact that COVID-19 had on trauma and related instability for children living in poverty. There has been little research on the nonacademic supports schools are providing for students (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). The number of COVID-19 reported suicides among youth and adolescents has increased. These have been related to mental distress where online schooling has been of little help (Manzar et al., 2020).

This study is important to school counselors because traditionally, they work in a brick and mortar setting, not virtually (ASCA, 2017). This learning curve requires a paradigm shift and a different skillset that the school counselor may not already possess. It further benefits the school counselors in Georgia because it is considered a hot spot or red zone state for active COVID-19 cases (CDC, 2020). Therefore, virtual school counseling may be the new norm for Georgia school counselors for an extended period. This study's findings will enhance and improve how these counselors deliver school counseling services to students and build their existing skillset.

Research Questions

RQ1

How are school counselors able to continue to meet the social and emotional needs of their students?

RQ2

What challenges are faced by school counselors during and after the transition to a virtual setting?

RQ3

What are school counselors' perceptions and attitudes toward virtual school counseling?

Definitions

1. *Virtual/Online school counseling* –implementing a school counseling program using technology and distance counseling (ASCA, 2017).

2. *Telemental health* -"the provision of behavioral and/or mental health care services using technological modalities in lieu of, or in addition to, traditional face-to-face methods (e.g., provision of therapy using the phone, diagnostic interviewing via video

teleconferencing, use of applications to track mood states, consultations via email)"

(American Psychological Association, Section: Types of Services, 2014).

3. *Psychoeducation* - "a particular concern, issue, or problem; to grow in self-understanding and interpersonal relationships; and to become more effective in understanding and solving problems that affect them" (Brown, 2018, p. 3).

Summary

This chapter provides a foundation for the remainder of the study. The problem is the lack of research regarding school counselors delivering services virtually amid a pandemic such as COVID-19 at the Georgia elementary setting. Furthermore, there is limited information regarding the use of qualitative research in the field of counseling in this area. The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to describe the present virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter will provide a review of the literature related to virtual school counseling amid COVID-19. The literature provides insight regarding the problem of the study as well as the gap in the literature. It is comprised of the following sections (a) theoretical framework, (b) related literature, and (c) summary.

Theoretical Framework

Yuksel et al. (2015) suggests that "phenomenology as a methodological framework has evolved into a process that seeks reality in individuals' narratives of their experiences of phenomena" (p. 2). The developer of this theoretical framework is Edmund Husserl. This study will address the lived experiences of school counselors working virtually amid COVID-19. The researcher will employ a qualitative approach to provide a rich account of the lived phenomenon of virtual counseling amid the Covid -19 pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, within the literature pertaining to counseling, qualitative research is limited (Heppner et al., 2016). Researchers (Berrios & Lucca, 2006; Ponterotto, 2005; Ponterotto et al., 2008) found that of the empirical studies published within 1990 and the 2000s, less than 20% represented qualitative research. This resulted for more scientific rigor, which involved statistical analysis and experimental designs (Ponterotto, 2010). Qualitative research in coursework required in counseling and psychology programs consisted of 10% (Heppner et al.). Despite the past criticisms and shifts away from qualitative research in counseling, it has begun to be considered relevant.

A phenomenological research design will be utilized in conducting the research study. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research helps the researcher learn about the

experience through the lens of individuals who experienced it. This study will seek to vividly describe the phenomenon of virtual counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced by school counselors working in an elementary school setting. The researcher will look for the common themes to emerge from the research experienced by all school counselor participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Related Literature

Role of School Counselor

Over decades, the school counselor's role has shifted from remedial or vocational guidance focus on rendering specialized services to all students school-wide (Dahir & Stone, 2012). A study conducted by Alexander et al. (2003) focused on the shift in school counseling and school counseling literature, as portrayed in the *Professional School Counseling* journal. During this time, there was a debate about whether school counselors should focus on mental health only, academic achievement only, or both within the school setting. The results reflected an increased awareness of system influences and aligned more with the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) model for school counseling. According to the Education Trust (2009),

> School counseling is a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success. The counselor assists students in their academic, career, social, and personal development and helps them follow the path to success. (p.1)

ASCA is a national organization that provides advocacy, guidance, and professional development for school counselors of all levels. They have been instrumental in constructing a

new narrative of who school counselors are and how students are different because of what they do in the school setting. In examining the role of school counselors, it is determined that they "have the responsibility to provide a school counseling program and develop programs to support all students in academic, career and social/emotional development that would emulate school counseling that would take place in a face-to-face environment" (ASCA, 2017, p. 2).

As a result of the foundational work of ASCA and other leaders in school counseling, school leaders tend to view school counselors' role, their skills, and training as essential in student achievement and social-emotional well-being. This reflects the leadership roles that school counselors play in schools, such as partnering with building-level principals, advocating, and collaborating (Wimberly & Brickman, 2014). School counselors collaborate with school psychologists, school social workers, mental health agencies, and other school personnel to meet students' needs. Additionally, school counselors are esteemed as integral components in school leadership and collaboration with parents and students (ASCA, 2012). Often, families need support to access resources and opportunities to bridge the academic achievement gap or meet other non-academic needs.

Although school counseling has evolved drastically throughout the years, it is evident that it is ever-changing. The work of school counselors has further evolved into social advocacy, which promotes the notion that "educational equity in a democratic society requires that all children--especially poor and minority youth who have traditionally been the least served by schools--be better prepared for the future" (House et al., 1998, p. 3). According to the CDC (2020), more than 1 in 5 (22%) of children living below the federal poverty level are diagnosed with developmental, behavioral, and/or mental disorders. School counselors advocate for these students to ensure equity in educational and social-emotional endeavors. The Children's Defense

Fund (2002, p. xix) proposed, "as child advocates, let us take risks, disarm our personal and organizational egos, try new strategies, work with new networks, and leave our comfort zones of business as usual." Working with new networks such as family-school-community partnerships offers school counselors an opportunity to enhance their students' academic achievement and social-emotional well-being through collaboration (Griffin & Farris, 2010).

School counselors typically serve in one of three areas (a) elementary school, (b) middle school, or (c) high school. Each role is essential for the academic and social development of students. The initial interactions with a school counselor occur during the elementary years. Elementary school counseling programs are designed to be preventative and developmental (ASCA, 2019). Based on the ASCA Mindset and Behaviors for Student Success, activities and interventions are implemented to address the academic, social, and emotional needs through a comprehensive and developmental program. In 2003, ASCA published a model for the intentional delivery of this program. Now in its fourth edition, the ASCA National Model is a framework for school counseling used by many school counselors in districts throughout the United States (ASCA, 2012). Within the ASCA National Model are action plans elaborating on how school counselors will address competencies, now known as Mindsets and Behaviors, effectively and efficiently to achieve the results outlined. There are basically three types of action plans used: (1) curriculum action plans, (2) small groups action plans, and (3) closing-the-gap action plans. ASCA (2012) defines each plan as follows:

Curriculum Action Plan – designed to help students develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills appropriate for their developmental level within the domains of academic, career, and personal/social development.

Small Group Action Plan – provides the focus and organization to the academic,

attendance, or behavioral goals through short-term interventions which typically involves

four-to-eight-week sessions.

Closing-the-Gap Action Plan – addresses academic or behavioral discrepancies that exist

between student groups. (pp. 53-54)

ASCA provides templates to assist school counselors in the design, documentation, and

implementation of these plans, which are similar to each other in terms of components. Although

each plan pertains to a different task or school counseling responsibility, they all include the

following information: (a) goals to be addressed, (b) domain(s), standard(s), and competencies,

which are consistent with school and program goals, (c) description of school counseling

activities to be delivered, (d) title of any packaged or created curriculum that will be used, (e)

timeline for completion of activities, (f) name of person(s) responsible for each activity, (g)

methods of evaluating school success using process, perception, and outcome data, and (h)

expected results for students in terms of what will be demonstrated by the student (ASCA, 2012,

p. 53). These plans help to focus and organize the work of the school counselor and create

accountability for the work. Additionally, ASCA provides results report templates for each of the

plans to measure what was accomplished. By completing these reports, school counselors can

reflect on their work and identify any gaps in services and resources. This information can thus be

used to advocate for the students and program, for purposes of program planning, in conducting

program evaluation and more.

The school counselor role is often viewed differently by various school personnel.

Furthermore, the counselor's role is important at all three levels of education. As stated

previously, the initial interactions between students and school counselors will occur in

elementary school. During these years, the role of the counselor is to collaborate with teachers and administrators to implement the most effective counseling program (Wilgus & Shelley, 1988). A few elements that elementary school counselors implement include but are not limited to classroom lessons, guidance and counseling-oriented meetings, and recognition programs.

Classroom lessons are an excellent way for counselors to interact with the students in a large setting. These lessons usually include counseling activities that can be completed in groups or individually. Through these classroom lessons, counselors have an opportunity to provide information and support to the entire student body. The lessons are based on competencies and curriculum standards and focus on the students' academic development, careers, and life skills. Counselors may find these sessions to be beneficial because they are able to identify and further understand where the students are academically and socially.

Counseling-oriented meetings can include a plethora of possibilities for the counselor, the student, and the teacher. These meetings are an opportunity for counselors "to participate in meetings that are directly affecting the developmental, behavioral, and emotional needs of the students" (Wilgus & Shelley, 1988, p. 260). Meetings may be individual, group-oriented, or parent conferences. The type of meeting needed will depend on the individual needs of the student. Individual meetings are one-on-one between the counselor and the student. Meeting with students individually can potentially allow the students to be more vulnerable and open to share their feelings and challenges they may be facing. One-on-one sessions are beneficial to counselors because it makes it easier for them to identify any problems first hand and provide an appropriate solution while establishing a rapport with the student. Group meetings are also an effective tactic for counselors to support students. If more than one student is

having a similar problem, group meetings can be an effective way to assist it as it may be a systemic issue. For students, being able to work with others, and knowing that they are not alone can motivate them to do better. This also allows the counselor the opportunity to further assess personal needs by being able to compare the difference in academic growth. Equally as important, parental involvement is key and aids counselors in determining the best strategies for growth and development. Communication plays a key role in the learning process, and it is important for parents to understand their child's strengths and weaknesses. Parent meetings are held for various reasons such as discussing the student's behavior, personal development, or academic development. There is a common misconception that parent meetings are for students who have exhibited disciplinary behaviors. This is simply not true. These meetings are not only to address negative behavior. Direct contact with parents will allow them to further understand how they can help their child be successful. It is often beneficial for the student if strategies implemented in school are continued at home as well. When strategies are practiced outside of the school building they become routine, and the students will begin to acquire new habits. It is imperative for parents to understand and recognize the best ways to support their child's continuous development.

Another duty that school counselors take on is to implement and recommend recognition programs for attendance, behavior incentives, and more. These are usually other duties as assigned. According to Wilgus and Shelley (1988), participation in recognition programs assists in identifying students who deserve special attention. These programs are intended to help identify the areas a student may need assistance with. Counselors assist in the process of referrals and assessments to secure the attention and support the students may need to advance academically.

Counselors in middle school serve just as much of a significant role as counselors on the elementary and high school level. Principals suggest that some of the counselor's highest level of priority include individual counseling, small-group counseling, classroom lessons, crisis counseling, coordinating intervention services, and consulting with parents, teachers, and administrators (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Of the identified duties of a counselor, individual counseling is ranked number one as a top priority. Middle school can be a challenging stage for students as they become teens and preteens trying to find their way. A school counselor's role is to be available to offer guidance and support for students when it is most needed. For example, if a student has a conflict or problem they are uncomfortable, for whatever reason, sharing, a counselor is open to listening and helping them to find a solution.

As a counselor, it is extremely pivotal to be unbiased and open-minded. This will encourage students to be vulnerable and open to expressing their emotions. Students will share things that a counselor may not support or agree with, but as a confidant, they are expected to be open and genuine to find the best solution for the problem at hand.

Zalaquett and Chatter (2012) noted that crisis counseling is ranked number two of the roles of a counselor. Crisis counseling is an intervention that provides assistance and support for students who may be facing a crisis. The role of the school counselor is to provide a form of treatment to counsel students following the immediate aftermath of the crisis experience. Students are also encouraged to share their experiences and emotions. The overall purpose of crisis counseling is to give emotional support to traumatized students and to encourage students to return or remain in school (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012).

The role of school counselors at the high school level is especially important as well. High school students are one step away from their future, and counselors are there to help

prepare them for their future endeavors. Counselors at the high school level focus on the same duties and priorities as counselors on the lower levels, but there is a specific difference that sets their duties apart. High school counselors spend an enormous amount of time to prioritize successfully preparing students for academic success, college, and the real world.

High school is considered the last milestone in a student's education process. It is vital that school counselors effectively execute their roles for students to gain further exposure and knowledge. Academic success is important because of several different reasons, and it is especially important for students looking to pursue a college career. Nevertheless, satisfactory grades throughout high school play a pivotal part in the college decision process. Counselors emphasize the importance of academic success and maintaining a notable grade point average. Colleges are going to require the student's grade point average during the application process. Grade point average will also be used to determine if the student is eligible for scholarships. The counselor also has to inform students of the significance of grade point average during their college application process, as well as all of the other factors that are included.

"High school counselors potentially hold a key position to help increase the number of U.S. students receiving post-secondary degrees" (McKillip et al., 2012, p. 34). During high school is the opportunity for students and counselors to start creating the foundation for college. Counselors are responsible for providing guidance for students and making sure that they are well aware of the options they have regarding college. This may include assisting students in their academic planning, financial requirements, or finding the perfect school for them. This is often accomplished by counselors by hosting college fairs or providing other opportunities for students to attend a college fair. This allows students to speak with

representatives from different colleges of interest and learn about the programs and other important details.

Every high school student will not attend college after graduation. Counselors take on the role of guiding and informing students of the alternative possibilities. Some students are interested in obtaining jobs after graduation rather than furthering their education. The counselor's role is to provide those students with the appropriate tools and resources necessary to reach their goals. Several counseling departments participate in career fairs and workshops as well as encourage career inventories so students get a better idea of what they would like to do post college.

Although school counselors may have specific duties, "considerable debates remain on clarifying the exact role of school counselors" (Wilgus & Shelley, 1988, p. 259). Teachers and administration staff have different perceptions on what they believe to be the exact role of a school counselor. As the curriculum and academic plans evolve, school counselors are expected to adapt in the most influential way for students to be successful. "Researchers are encouraging counselors to document their functions" (Wilgus & Shelley, 1988, p. 259). This will allow them to create visible and well-defined roles.

Virtual/Online School Counseling

Most schools operate in brick and mortar buildings. This has been the traditional model for delivering educational curricula for students in primary through secondary grades for centuries. Typically, in modern civilization, students will progress through elementary grades in one building, onto middle grades in a different building, and then another one in high school. Traditionally, these are the work settings in which school counselors have been trained to operate. However, as times change, so has the work setting of the school counselor.

ASCA (2017) developed a position statement regarding the school counselor and virtual school counseling as follows:

School counselors working in a virtual setting provide a school counseling program through the use of technology and distance (virtual/online/e-learning) counseling with the same standards and adherence to ethics as school counselors working in traditional school settings. School counselors work collaboratively with all stakeholders to ensure equity, access, and success of all students whether virtual school counseling is offered synchronously or asynchronously.

This statement was in response to overwhelming enrollment throughout the United States in online or virtual educational settings (Setzer & Lewis, 2005). In 2017, there were 528 virtual schools established throughout the United States, with 278,500 students in 34 states including Georgia (Molnar et al., 2017).

As virtual counseling is still evolving, Steele (2017) reported offering synchronous services such as mini-courses, group counseling, individual counseling, and workshops as part of an online counseling program. These services were rendered via various technological platforms such as Zoom, Adobe Connect, Blue Jeans, Skype, and Go to Meeting. Asynchronous services were also provided, such as websites, articles, discussion forums, webinars, emails, and recorded presentations. Steele et al. (2017) surveyed the usage of online technology within school counseling programs. The sample population consisted of 973 school counselors. The results indicated that online technology was utilized sometimes among approximately 50% of the school counselors survey in the following areas (a) program management and operations, (b) consultation, (c) collaboration, and (d) professional development. They further indicated

occasional use by another 25% in the following additional areas (a) school-wide events and activities, (b) student planning tasks such as advising, and (c) classroom lesson delivery.

Clark (2001) defined a virtual school as "an educational organization that offers K–12 courses through the Internet or Web-based methods" (p. 1). The virtual or online school's existence grew from a diverse need of the student population and their families. Like traditional school settings, online schools can be public and/or private (Molnar et al., 2013). Regardless of the school setting, traditional or virtual, school counselors must adapt to accommodate students' needs. In terms of counseling services rendered, online service quality should be equal to those received in-person (Currie, 2010).

ASCA (2017) offers the following guidelines for school counselors' interactions with students while working in a virtual setting:

(a) adhere to the same ethical guidelines in a virtual setting as school counselors in a face-to-face setting, (b) recognize and acknowledge the challenges and limitations of virtual school counseling, (c) implement procedures for students to follow in both emergency and non-emergency situations when the school counselor is not available, (d) recognize and mitigate the limitation of virtual school counselor confidentiality, which may include unintended viewers or recipients, (e) inform both the student and parent/guardian of the benefits and limitations of virtual counseling, (f) educate students on how to participate in the electronic school counseling relationship to minimize and prevent potential misunderstandings that could occur due to lack of verbal cues and inability to read body language or other visual cues that provide contextual meaning to the school counseling process and school counseling relationship, (g) educate students about appropriate conduct in the online setting and using digital literacy as a tool to have an impact on

students, and (h) incorporate lessons that align with academic, career and social/emotional

domains (ASCA, 2017, pp. 93-94).

Although virtual or online counseling may have many strengths, such as decreased

stigma to mental health counseling and increased comfort with disclosing (Bathje et al.,

2014), there are also weaknesses. Differing from in-person interaction as opposed to working

with students online makes it difficult to gauge emotions, affect, and ideation (Mallen et al.,

2005). Baker and Ray (2011) cited experiencing a lack of non-verbal cues as a major

challenge. . School counselors must be able to assess their students. The accuracy of these

assessments is critical to the level and type of interventions required.

As noted in a study conducted by Wright (2012), distance counseling involves two

separate environments: the counselor's physical environment and the client's physical

environment. This separation, in itself, creates a barrier between them like sitting behind a

desk does with both in one environment. Therefore, counselors may experience difficulty

nurturing the therapeutic relationship.

Herold (2013) conducted interviews with counseling staff employed at an online school.

The findings revealed that they felt that online counseling was a challenge to their counseling

skills. Furthermore, other challenges included the inability, at times, to see the students' faces,

challenges with confidentiality regarding information shared online, and the cost of running

online schools.

School counselor connectedness with students is diminished in an online setting.

Counselors and students have expressed not being able to connect fully (Lapan et al., 2014).

Human interaction, decreased sense of intimacy, trust, difficulty in assessing, internet access, and

commitment have been identified as weaknesses or disadvantages of online counseling (Poh Li et al., 2013). This is crucial to the effective delivery of services.

Osborn et al. (2014) found only two studies that examined virtual school counseling, and suggested that there is limited literature regarding this topic. Many school counselors feel they do not possess the level of skills or confidence in delivering services via technology (Glasheen et al., 2013). Delivery can differ drastically in the traditional setting versus online. A proficient level of skills and knowledge in the use of technology is needed to conduct online counseling services properly. Nevertheless, some school counselors have indicated a lack of effective training and professional development with technology and applications (Steele et al., 2015).

Another challenge to online school counseling is providing culturally responsive, comprehensive services to culturally diverse students (Lee, 2001). As school counselors, one must be culturally competent and culturally sensitive. Different cultures have varying values and customs. Knowing what they are and how to address them will enhance the therapeutic relationship and, ultimately, the individual's progress in therapy.

Holmes and Kozlowski (2016) conducted a pilot study consisting of online students in a group counseling setting conducted by master's level counseling students enrolled in a school counseling program. Experiential training and proper supervision were offered in facilitating virtual counseling groups for at-risk students in academics. This study revealed many challenges of online group work with students. This information was valuable to counselor educators as well as to future school counselors.

As stated by Johnson (2016), confidentiality can be a major issue when conducting online counseling. School counselors should make every effort to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the counseling session. However, this can pose a challenge online as there as several possible

threats, including computer hackers, others in the home listening or viewing the session, or unauthorized recording by the student. Limitations to confidentiality should be discussed in detail before the counseling session.

Ethics in Counseling

ASCA has established a code of ethics for all school counselors to follow. These standards are to be adhered to by school counselors working in both traditional schools and virtual or online school settings. Section A.15 addresses the ethical concerns and obligations of school counselors regarding virtual/distance school counseling. School counselors must:

(a) Adhere to the same ethical guidelines in a virtual/distance setting as school counselors in face-to-face settings, (b) recognize and acknowledge the challenges and limitations of virtual/distance school counseling, (c) implement procedures for students to follow in both emergency and non-emergency situations when the school counselor is not available, (d) recognize and mitigate the limitation of virtual/distance school counseling confidentiality, which may include unintended viewers or recipients, (e) inform both the student and parent/guardian of the benefits and limitations of virtual/distance counseling, and (f) educate students on how to participate in the electronic school counseling relationship to minimize and prevent potential misunderstandings that could occur due to lack of verbal cues and inability to read body language or other visual cues that provide contextual meaning to the school counseling process and school counseling relationship (ASCA, 2016, p. 6).

Sori and Hecker (2015) argued that providing counseling services outside of the school setting, specifically online, encounters various ethical and legal issues such as confidentiality, privacy, and privileged communication. King-White (2019) conducted a phenomenological study

of school counselors in an online setting focused on ethical issues. Involved in this study were ten participants working in online schools. A survey was administered to all ten participants. As a result of this study, strategies, and best practices for addressing ethical dilemmas were developed.

On the contrary, in the community, mental health, and/or clinical setting, things differed. As discussed in their study, Haberstroh et al. (2014) revealed that "overall, less than half of state boards directly allowed the practice of online clinical work through their local state laws or ethical codes and no states specifically prohibited online clinical practice" (p. 155). Today, with the need for such services, more attention is given to the adherence and monitoring of such practices. The ACA's (2014) code of ethics in section H ethical guidelines provides utilization distance counseling, technology, and social media in professional counseling. It addresses knowledge and legal considerations, informed consent and security, client verification, distance counseling relationship, records and web maintenance, and social media.

A Delphi study was conducted to examine different ethical issues related to the counseling profession (Herlihy et al., 2011). A total of 59 themes emerged with an overarching theme of essentially, within a climate of change, continue utilizing best practices. The theme with the highest sum of scores was determined to be ensuring that counselors practice ethically and abide by the code. Although experts considered this the most important theme, there were four more that scored high. There were described as: (1) strengthening the professional identity of counselors, (2) determining boundaries of competence, and (3) practicing with multicultural competence.

DeMille (2014) developed a six-stage decision-making model for managing ethical dilemmas in clinical counseling. Moreover, she highly recommends the familiarity of affiliated

organization and association's ethical standards by all counselors. This helps to guide clinicians during online clinical work using best practices and proven strategies.

Kaplan et al. (2011) surveyed state licensing boards that regulate the use of the internet when counseling clients. This is described as videoconferencing, the use of chat rooms, email exchanges, and more (Rummell & Joyce, 2010). They found that states had varying views on the use of internet-based counseling. The findings indicate that counseling boards in 24 states, including Georgia, responded that there was no rule, regulation, or law. Ten states, only within their state, regulated the use. It was revealed that four states did not support the use of counselors using technology-assisted with clients. Over the years, this has changed as counseling has evolved, and the demand is higher. Now, in Georgia, there is a rule. Six hours of telemental health training to utilize technology-assisted counseling.

Moreover, school counselors often are tasked with the responsibility of consultation and collaboration with various stakeholders when counseling students. Cook et al. (2020) recommended that school counselors adhere to district policies and work with the school administration regarding approved platforms and any limitations. Iyer and Baxter-MacGregor (2010) concurred that this might involve ethical decision-making related to confidentiality while maintaining the trust and ethical obligations to stakeholders and compliance with relevant regulations and laws. This is true of face-to-face counseling or virtual counseling.

COVID-19 and School Counseling.

COVID-19 is a disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), referred to as the novel coronavirus (Mayo Clinic, 2020). Throughout the world, millions of people have been affected by this disease. As of March 2021, more than one hundred thousand have died from it, and millions have tested positive for it. Since the onset, it has left a

devasting path of destruction. In addition to lives lost and mass illness, businesses and schools have been forced to shut down or to operate with severe modifications.

The rampant spread of COVID-19 caused the sudden closure of schools for many across the nation. On March 17, 2020, with little notice, it was announced by the Governor of the state of Georgia that all Georgia schools were to close. Parents and educators alike struggled to establish and implement new routines for students. Parents now had to manage school at home, and for some, while working from home. These were unprecedented times. With school closures came fear, anxiety, and uncertainty (Shah et al., 2020).

Russell et al. (2020) discussed the potential effects of school closures due to COVID-19 instead of other epidemics and pandemics. One major finding was that children were not only affected academically, but also socially and emotionally as well. Stressors of home confinement on children during COVID-19 have had a significant psychological impact (Wang et al., 2020). As described by Wang et al., these stressors include "prolonged duration, fears of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate information, lack of in-person contact with classmates, friends, teachers, lack of personal space at home, and family financial loss" (p. 946). On the contrary, the authors also argue that this could also allow parents and children to increase their interactions and family activities while also enhancing their self-sufficiency skills.

Nevertheless, children are considered the most vulnerable in their life-altering situations (Rollins, 2020). This presented a crucial challenge for school counselors. The vast majority of public and private school counselors worked in a "traditional" setting, the brick and mortar building.

This paradigm shift for school counselors has changed the mode of program delivery and other services offered. The mode of delivery has become virtual. School counselors provide

individual counseling, group counseling, and crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. School counselors are scrambling to devise a feasible plan of action for the online setting. While "counselors understand the additional concerns related to the use of distance counseling, technology, and social media and make every attempt to protect the confidentiality and meet any legal and ethical requirements for the use of such resources" (Corey et al., 2015, p. 545), virtual counseling may still present challenges for many.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, school counseling services, such as classroom lessons, small groups, and individual counseling, were delivered through an online format. This presented many limitations and challenges (ASCA, 2020). Many school counselors expressed that this change is outside of their comfort zones. Yet, students had to be served as the needs were the same. For many students at Title I schools, the needs increased expeditiously. Many students enrolled in Title I schools reside in families whose income falls below the poverty line. The income of a family can potentially have significant effects on the well-being of a child (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). This is especially true regarding the child's ability to perform at their achievement level, both academically and socially. These students most likely participate in free and reduced lunch programs, lack adequate health care, have little to no access to the internet or computers, and live in subpar communities. These challenges would predispose them to greater difficulty academically, socially, and emotionally during school closure. However, children who have experienced trauma and maltreatment are more motivated to meet safety needs than foster social relationships or strive for academic success (Costa, 2017).

Despite the challenges of virtual counseling, school counselors remain accessible and dedicated to helping students and families navigate this time's difficulties. Families faced a "shelter in place" order, which confined many of them to their homes. This resulted in no work or

school, which caused a decrease in income for some parents and social interaction for most students. Reported cases of child abuse and neglect, as well as domestic violence, increased. These actions resulted in a spike in mental health services due to anxiety and depressive symptoms. It was confirmed in a study by Roy-Byrne (2020) that the COVID-19 had psychological impacts on healthcare workers and "ordinary" people as well. These impacts were reported as irritability, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and anger. Onyeaka et al. (2020) also added fear and anger as possible effects on individuals and families confirmed or suspected of having COVID-19. Brooks et al. (2020) suggested that the effects of living through this pandemic in quarantine could have long-term effects of a substantial nature even after the pandemic has ended. During this time of uncertainty, school counselors can assist families and students with their anxiety by employing approaches such as cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), psychoeducation, and/or narrative therapy (Jack, 2020). According to the Centre on the Developing Child (2016), children's behavior and learning can be affected long-term by disrupting stress response systems and brain structure due to toxic stress. However, school counselors must continue to work within their scope of practice. Referrals to appropriate agencies are paramount during such a time.

The mass quarantine throughout the nation has produced feelings of fear and anxiety in many parents and students (Rubin, 2020). During these times, the child's adult caregivers will be relied upon by the children to reassure safety and answers of some sort (NASP, 2020). Children often witness the behaviors of the adults in their lives. In some instances, the feelings of fear and anxiety exhibited by parents are mimicked by the children. Psychoeducation can be very helpful in addressing this issue. Roy et al. (2020) surveyed adults regarding their anxiety and mental health needs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was conducted online with 662

respondents. The findings indicated that over 80% of the participants found themselves often preoccupied with lingering thoughts of COVID-19. This resulted in increased mental healthcare needs, sleep difficulties, obsessive use of gloves and hand sanitizer, and paranoia. These organizations, the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Nurses, recognized the importance of parents having constructive conversations with their children regarding COVID-19. As a result, they published specific guidelines for doing so, which includes the following: (a) remain calm and reassuring, (b) make yourself available, (c) be open and honest, (d) monitor social media usage and tv viewings, (e) try to maintain a normal routine, (f) use age-appropriate explanations, and (g) discuss and model good hygiene and protection practices.

As students return to school in the brick and mortar setting, strong feelings of insecurity, both psychologically and physically, emerge (ASCA & NASP, 2020). These feelings should be affirmed as well as identified needs must be met sufficiently for students to feel safe and fully engage in the learning process (ASCA & NASP, 2020). The American School Counselor Association and the National Association of School Psychologists have identified school social workers, School psychologists, and school counselors as the mental health professionals hired within schools who will play a crucial role in this enormous work. The authors discussed several considerations for school districts to explore as they plan for students and staff to return to the building. These considerations include: (a) multidisciplinary decision making, (b) plan for unpredictable and evolving context, (c) addressing social and emotional learning and mental health needs, (d) access to school-employed mental health professionals as well as school nurses, (e) relationships and transitions, (f) family engagement, (g) potential for trauma, (h) addressing staff needs, (i) addressing physical and psychological safety, and (j) discipline (ASCA & NASP,

2020). Professional school counselors will be critical in the creation and implementation of this plan.

Virtual counseling has become a pivotal element under the current circumstances of the global pandemic. Countless counties and districts have shifted to online learning over the fall semester. Because all lessons are done virtually, it has also caused a shift in the way school counselors may reach the student body. Counseling lessons are more frequently given through Zoom and other video conferencing platforms. The transfer of counseling services online can be overwhelming and challenging during these times. Although virtual counseling is not new, the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) has provided counselors with resources to help them adapt during these unprecedented times.

Though there are challenges and disadvantages to virtual counseling, there are also advantages and further benefits of shifting to virtual. One of the advantages of this type of counseling is that it is much safer. Due to the current pandemic, schools are taking extra precautions to keep students and staff members safe. Online counseling eliminates the risk of spreading the virus by putting an end to face-to-face sessions until further notice.

Virtual counseling is also more convenient for the parties involved. Because students and staff are not in the school building, they can be on the go if need be. As long as there are a suitable device and internet connection, virtual counseling can take place at any given location.

Another advantage of virtual counseling is time and scheduling. Counselors can get a significant amount of tasks done due to everything being virtual. This includes participating in scheduled virtual meetings in an attempt to get things done quickly and efficiently. For example, if meetings were in-person counselors would have to account for the time it would

take to complete actions leading up to a conference. This could include walking to the classroom or any distractions that may occur. With virtual counseling students and counselors are simply just logging on to their computer to join the video conference.

The abrupt need for virtual learning has immensely affected schools as a whole. With every element adapting, there has been a significant change in the format of day-to-day counseling activities. In an effort to adapt, school counselors are using online communication methods such as E-mail, Web tutorials, social media, chat, and videoconferencing (Steele et al., 2015). Counselors have found that E-mails are a valuable direct form of communication to reach students and families. Communication is extremely vital now more than ever. The act of maintaining contact helps to effectively keep everyone in the loop and have an understanding of the new virtual counseling plans.

Although all activities are online, school counselors, for elementary levels especially, are compelled to continue to provide hands-on and interactive work. For example, this can be done by providing students with a video to watch and providing discussion questions to encourage engagement and feedback. This could also be done by reading a story or providing an interactive questionnaire during virtual classroom counseling sessions.

In conclusion, virtual counseling has been both beneficial and challenging to educators under current circumstances. Transitioning from face-to-face to virtual learning has been a tremendous change but not impossible. Virtual counseling was evident before the pandemic, but now it is widely used and has had a huge impact on schools in general. Virtual learning and virtual counseling is now something that is used within the elementary, middle, and high school level of education. Not only are counselors and staff having to adapt to this online change, but students are as well. Staff, especially teachers and counselors, are often

seen as "lifelines for many students" (Rock, 2020, p. 1). This is a difficult time for many as imagined. Teachers and counselors have the opportunity to make a great impact by "prioritizing student safety and managing stress" as this is "critical to the well-being and long-term academic success of our students" (Rock, 2020, p. 1). Staff and school counselors can do the following to ensure this happens:

1) Create safety: Be available, be compassionate. Help students (and parents!) create predictability and a feeling of control. Connect visually or auditorily with students.

2) Provide social and emotional support to students (and families): Be a student's support system. Help kids connect with each other. You can engage directly with parents as well.

3) Prioritize health and well-being: Adding more stress will worsen a student's cognitive ability to adapt and learn, so consider the total academic workload you and your fellow teachers are asking of your students. Promote healthy sleeping, eating and exercise habits.

4) Identify children and families who need additional support: Your ability to connect families or students to resources now can make all the difference. Mandated reporter duties do not stop because children are not in the classroom, but what you see may be different. (Rock, 2020, p. 1)

As time progresses, hopefully students and staff members will improve in their abilities to work with technology, and they will be able to get tasks done more effectively and in the best manner possible. Schools have been provided with numerous tools and resources to make the outcome of the situation so that in the end all students are academically successful.

Telemental Health

As mentioned above, during the pandemic, individuals in several communities were ordered to "shelter in place" or under "stay home" orders. With this in place, mental health providers and therapists were not seeing clients physically in their offices. Services were offered and delivered via telemental health formats. The American Psychological Association (2014) defines telemental health as "the provision of behavioral and/or mental health care services using technological modalities in lieu of, or in addition to, traditional face-to-face methods (e.g., provision of therapy using the phone, diagnostic interviewing via video teleconferencing, use of applications to track mood states, consultations via email)" (p. 1).

Whaibeh et al. (2020) explored the relevance of this service as related to COVID-19. Due to people being confined to rooms, hospitals, and houses, anxiety levels increased, as did the need for counseling services. In the article, the authors offered several recommendations for the use of telemental health. Some of the recommendations included therapists' training, funding for telemental health services, relevant guidance, timely information, and expanding access across states to alleviate therapists' shortages. This would also benefit schools and mental health services delivered in this setting to students who would not otherwise receive such services for various reasons.

While telehealth structurally differs from a face-to-face delivery format, it has proven to effectively deliver medical and mental health services (Springer et al., 2020). Moselle (2020) cited advantages for utilizing telemental health as the flexibility provided, such as location and having access to numerous counselors and services. During school closures, school counseling services delivery through telemental health services have similar effectiveness as in-person services (Golberstein et al., 2020). However, this could present challenges if both parties do not

have adequate technology or internet access. Springer et al. (2020) conducted a phenomenological study exploring the experiences of ten graduate students who utilized videoconferencing as the primary mode of delivery for mental health services. The study revealed technological challenges to care, such as (a) inadequate functioning, (b) difficulty in assessing "visual and auditory cues" (p. 208), (c) rapport building was stifled, and (d) difficulties as related to particular populations. Moselle (2020) further cited that telemental health cons include distractions, technical difficulties, and the inability to ensure privacy. In a Title I school where so many students and families are often living in poverty, several of these challenges may be encountered. This could result in numerous challenges for the professional school counselor as well as other educators.

Researchers (Racine et al., 2020; Stephan et al., 2016) agree that the school setting, in its natural context, has been identified as essential to students receiving mental health services. It has proven to be indicative of yielding a higher rate of follow up care than typically seen in traditionally recognized settings for mental health services (Stephan et al., 2016). Stephan et al. (2016) concurs that schools "as an optimal natural setting for providing a full continuum of mental health supports to young people, and school-based telemental health (TMH) is considered to be a viable mechanism to increase access to specialty mental health providers, including psychiatrists" (p. 1). They conducted a study which elaborates of the "potential and limitations of school telemental health" (Stephan et al., 2016, p.1). Findings indicate with that the children and adolescent population, telemental health have been well received and offers promising outcomes. Through focus groups and reviewing the literature, Stephan et al. found advantages of utilizing telemental health to include an increased capacity and access to care with marked efficiency. The noted limitations included concerns of

patient's privacy and concerns of being able to fully engage and interact effectively via telemental health. It was concluded that perhaps a combination of both, in-person and telemental health services, would produce the most benefits for the patient and families. In summary, Stephan et al. (2016) concluded that school-based telemental health services "should be considered as a part of a comprehensive service delivery system for students, in order to address shortages and gaps in specialty child and adolescent mental healthcare, and to maximize efficiency and productivity" (p. 2).

Racine et al. (2020) states "as physical distancing measures have been implemented and will likely persist into 2021, organizations providing trauma treatment to children and their families have had to rapidly pivot to telemental health to maintain service delivery with clients" (p. 1). As COVID emerged, services once offered in a clinical setting, such as individual therapy, group therapy, and family, were now switching to virtual methods. The authors cited that the literature on providing these services via telemental health to their population was very scarce.

Racine et al. (2020) recognizes telemental health as an effective avenue for delivering mental health services, especially to children dealing with childhood trauma, but acknowledges that it is not without disadvantages. Collectively, the authors addressed the barriers as well as benefits of telemental health services as related to the care of those who have experienced or experiencing child trauma. The article explores the limitations and considerations of this service during and after COVID-19. The benefits stated were: (a) reduced barriers to access, (b) increased cost effectiveness, and (c) broad availability of services. Likewise, the limitations reported were: (a) issues involving emotional regulation and attention deficits, more time sheltered with abusers, and (c) complexities identifying

dissociative symptoms (Racine et al., 2020). As often seen, there are additional barriers face

by marginalized families such as these and those facing economic crisis and poverty. Such

barriers, as mentioned earlier, include inability to provide a confidential, private, and safe

space, diminished confidentiality, absence of adequate, reliable technology and internet, and

hesitance to open-up or connect. All of these barriers impact the effectiveness of the

telemental health services provided to the individuals and families.

Langarizadeh et al. (2017) conducted a systemic review in the areas of technologies,

applications, challenges, and advantages linked to telemental health care. The authors

examined twenty-five "high quality" articles published between 2000 and 2017 in their study.

The study's findings were indicative of telemental health care being an expanded domain

with the capacity to support conventional mental health services. The results included

"multiple capabilities and technologies for providing effective interventions" for clients and

"a wide variety of innovative choices and strategies for interventions" including substantial

possibilities for the future for mental health clinicians. Below are the categories and

subcategories of the study's findings:

> (1) Capabilities: (a) automated evaluation, (b) online information exchange and
>
> support services, (c) psychiatric consultation in primary care and emergency rooms,
>
> (d) asynchronous psychotherapy, (e) home care and related interventions; (2) Specific
>
> designs: (a) client vs therapists, (b) synchronous and asynchronous interactions, (c)
>
> requirements of mental healthcare settings; (3) Available technologies: (a)
>
> videoconference, telephone and messaging systems, (b) web-based interactions, (c)
>
> mobile phone technology, (d) networking via social media and group discussions, (e)
>
> simulated people and places, (f) internet games; (4) Advantages: (a) improved access,

(b) excellent results from individual and group therapies, (c) social networks, (d)

flexible online interactions, (e) auto-mated questions and answers, (f) enhanced profits

and reduced costs, and (e) future innovative potentials; and (5) Challenges: (a) costs of

online services and equipment, (b) communication quality control, (c) limited

professional skills for online communication, (d) ethical and regulatory concerns, (e)

information privacy and reliability, and (f) other issues (Langarizadeh et al., 2017, p.

242).

Burnout & School Counselors

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school counselors face many challenges and obstacles.

The transition from working in a brick and mortar setting to a virtual setting is a challenge in

itself for school counselors across the nation. The many demands and uncertainties while trying

to assist students and families is indeed a tremendous burden. Consequently, school counselors

can experience compassion fatigue as they work tirelessly with students and families in need.

Phillips (2020) defines compassion fatigue as "the emotional residue or strain of exposure to

working with those suffering from consequences of traumatic events" (p. 1). School counselors

have seen first-hand the responses of trauma in students and their families caused by COVID-19.

Families have suffered devastating losses (death of loved ones, jobs, homes), decreased

healthcare, emotional issues, and mental health issues. Working in this setting regularly can lead

to compassion fatigue for mental health professionals rendering services. The article cited some

symptoms as being associated with compassion fatigue to include: (a) feelings of depression or

sadness, (b) sleep problems, (c) intrusive thoughts or nightmares, (d) changes in appetite, (e)

anxiety, (f) anger or irritability, (g) compulsion to work more and longer, (h) a diminished sense

of fulfillment, (i) decreased self-confidence, (j) difficulty creating boundaries between work and

personal life, (k) feelings of isolation, and more. The author contends that psychoeducation is key in helping clients to address compassion fatigue. Psychoeducation involves learning about "a particular concern, issue, or problem; to grow in self-understanding and interpersonal relationships; and become more effective in understanding and solving problems that affect them" (Brown, 2018, p. 3). This is often done individually or in a group setting.

Likewise, school counselors also experience burnout as they are often the only mental health professionals in their building schools. Heavy caseloads and unrealistic duties are assigned to the counselor by the school administrator, often leading to burnout. Phillips (2020) further defines burnout as a "cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with the workload and institutional stress, not trauma-related" (p. 1). Counselor burnout can lead to many negative consequences for all stakeholders. When burnout occurs, a counselor's effectiveness in the counseling process may suffer. Mullen and Gutierrez (2016) conducted a study with school counselors regarding burnout and stress-related direct student services. It was found that those counselors experiencing burnout negatively impacted the work performed in that area. Stress was also significant but did not contribute as much to facilitating the services mentioned. Burnout in counselors may be indicated by any of the following actions: (a) missing or being late for sessions, (b) avoiding clients after dreading coming in, (c) abruptly ending sessions, (d) experiencing unusual bitterness or resentment, (e) unethical conduct, (f) inability to detach from work, (g) increased alcohol and/or substance abuse, (h) abandoning professional practices/trainings, (i) decreased interest in leisure or personal activities, and (j) experiencing vicarious trauma (Andreula, 2011).

As rewarding as the profession of school counseling may be, it is important to practice self-care as school counselors continue to work with students and families who have faced

trauma. Taking care of oneself is vitally important in any helping field, especially counseling. Mental health professionals spend a significant amount of time and energy listening to and working with individuals in crisis (Skovholt et al., 2001). Bradley et al. (2013) suggested alternative self-care considerations and adequate sleep, exercise, a well-balanced diet, and professional and personal help from other professionals.

Burnout among school counselors is highly probable during the pandemic as it produces stress and anxiety for them as well as the students served. As they seek to help students, families, colleagues, and administration cope and adjust, the same must also be done for themselves. Practicing some of the self-care above practices can ensure the health and stability of these mental health professionals. This will help them in being effective in their positions and endure through different times.

Summary

School counseling is an integral component of the social and emotional development of children. As the literature has exhibited, the work performed by school counselors has changed over the years and continues to evolve. As school counselors continue to advocate for their professional identity and clearly define the work they do, yet another challenge presents itself. Although there have been numerous k-12 online schools to surface over the past years, this work has traditionally been done in a brick and mortar setting for public education. Recently, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused schools to close, school counselors were forced to operate in a virtual setting. This is not a role that has been extensively researched, especially as it pertains to school closure. This study will explore the lived experiences of school counselors working virtually amidst the challenges of a pandemic. It will fill in the gap of limited qualitative research in

counseling virtually or online and improve school counselors transitioning from a traditional setting

to a virtual platform.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This study explored school counselors' lived virtual counseling experiences in an elementary school setting amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the experiences of school counselors in the state of Georgia were essential to this study. The study addressed this gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of elementary school counselors working virtually during the pandemic, by describing how they met their students' social and emotional needs, and by reporting their perceptions of virtual school counseling.

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the research methods employed in this study. The research design and the research questions were revealed. Furthermore, the participants and their selection process were clearly stated. This section also included procedures for data collection, data analysis, interview strategy and questions, and the role of investigator bias.

Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design which "involves understanding the complexity of people's lives by examining individual perspectives in context" (Heppner et al., 2016, p. 357). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research describes the experiences of individuals who lived in a phenomenon consisting of what was experienced and how it was experienced. This study consisted of a transcendental phenomenological research approach. It described the common meaning for several elementary school counselors regarding their lived experiences of virtual counseling during the pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the approach as described in Creswell and Poth, the researcher used the eight steps outlined for conducting phenomenological research, which were as follows:

1. Determine if the research problem is best examined by using a phenomenological approach.

2. Identify a phenomenon of interest to study and describe it.

3. Distinguish and specify the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology.

4. Collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon by using interviews.

5. Generate themes from the analysis of significant statements.

6. Develop textual and structural descriptions.

7. Report the essence of the phenomenon by using a composite description.

8. Present the understanding of the essence of the experience in written form. (p. 81)

Research Questions

RQ1: "How were school counselors able to continue to meet the social and emotional needs of their students?"

RQ2: "What challenges were faced by school counselors during and after the transition to a virtual setting?"

RQ3: "What were school counselors' perceptions and attitudes toward virtual school counseling?"

Setting

The setting for this phenomenological study was situated within the state of Georgia and in the elementary setting. Participation was solicited throughout all regions represented by GSCA and the elementary school counselor's Facebook page. This setting was chosen as it was the work setting and state of employment of the researcher. Conducting this study adds to the literature for this setting and the researcher's profession. At the elementary level in Georgia schools, the

organizational structure consists of principals, assistant principals, school counselors, other certified staff, and classified personnel. School counselors are an integral part of the school's leadership team.

Interviews for this study took place via the online platform, Zoom. Participants were recruited through use of snowball sampling. Therefore, the setting was unlimited.

Participants

Participants for this survey consisted of school counselors employed in a traditional elementary school setting. The population sample was selected from among elementary school counselors employed in Georgia. The sampling type best suited for this study was purposeful sampling which means it "intentionally samples a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under investigation" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148. Snowball sampling was the sampling strategy utilized for participant selection from people who know of people who fit the study criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Heppner et al. (2016) suggested that researchers explore first "their circle of friends and acquaintances, either in their current community or other communities they have lived, professional organizations, potential associations or churches, gym, etc." (p. 212). Moreover, these participants clearly articulated their lived experiences with this phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2016). Participants were recruited from a pool of candidates identified by the Georgia School Counselors Association (GSCA), the Elementary School Counselors Facebook group, and from the researcher's circle of professional acquaintances as elementary school counselors in Georgia. Therefore, the setting is unlimited but broad enough for an adequate size sample. As offered by Heppner et al., the sample size for a phenomenological study is not absolute. In qualitative research, it is recommended to limit the sample size to a few individuals, particularly ranging from 3 to 10 (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dukes 1984). The researcher recruited five participants to complete the interview process as

suggested by Polkinghorne (1989). Pseudonyms were provided to protect the participants'

privacy. After the study, each participant received compensation in the form of one twenty-five-

dollar VISA gift card for participating. In addition, demographic information for each participant

is displayed in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Race	Highest Degree	License/ Certifications
Melinda	37	F	Black	Specialist	Georgia Educator: School Counseling P-12
Damion	36	M	Black	Masters	Georgia Educator: School Counseling P-12 Alaska School Counselor, Associate Professional Counselor, National Certified Counselor
Cherry	43	F	Black	Specialist	Georgia Educator: School Counseling P-12
Gabrielle	52	F	Black	Masters	Georgia Educator: School Counseling P-12
Lashaun	39	F	Black	Specialist	Georgia Educator: School Counseling P-12

Table 2

Participants' Demographics (cont.)

Participant Pseudonyms	Length of time as School Counselor	How long at current school? District?	Title I	Demographic Location of school
Melinda	14 years	1.5 years/ 9 years	Yes	Urban
Damion	5.5 years	2.5 years/ 5.5 years	Yes	Suburban
Cherry	5 years	10 years/ 11 years	Yes	Rural
Gabrielle	12 years	2 years/ 2 years	Yes	Urban
Lashaun	14 years	7 years/ 17 years	Yes	Suburban

Procedures

The GSCA member directory was accessed online to identify elementary school counselors in Georgia. Additionally, a recruitment letter was posted to the Elementary School Counselors Facebook page. These two outlets did not produce any potential participants; therefore, all participants were selected by using snowball sampling. Inclusionary criteria identified school counselors who worked in an elementary school setting between August 1, 2019 and December 31, 2020. A recruitment letter and approved letter of consent were sent to all identified school counselors via email. These documents contained compensation information and any other information pertinent to the study. Upon receiving a response from all interested participants, an interview was scheduled for those selected for participation in the study. Each participant returned a signed letter of informed consent to the researcher prior to or on the day of the interview.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom. Demographic data such as years of experience, advanced degrees, licensure, or certification were collected as well. Each

interview was recorded using the online platform with an audio recorded backup using an iPhone. The interviews took place over a two-week interval. Once completed, all interviews were transcribed using software called Temi and emailed to the participants for member checking. Member checking occurred to allow members an opportunity to review the transcript and check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Any necessary corrections were made as reported by the participants. One follow-up interview was conducted for clarity and further explanation. In efforts to ensure confidentiality in this study, data was stored on a password-locked computer and may be used anonymously in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher has access to these recordings. This was important to protect the identity of participants and information pertaining to their work locations. Once IRB approval was received, a pilot of the interview questions was conducted with experts in the field to include school counselors. The selected small sample of experts were outside of the study sample. This ensured clarity of the interview questions, instructions, and the wording (Cozby & Bates, 2012).

The Researcher's Role

The researcher was employed as a school counselor in a traditional Title I elementary school setting. The researcher focused solely on the lived experiences of other school counselors and not her own. The researcher was an elementary school counselor in Georgia. Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, the researcher provided a copy to each participant to check for accuracy.

Data Collection

Data collection for this phenomenological study included interviews and researcher reflection notes (memoing). There were no available documents such as school counseling action plans. Utilizing multiple sources of data provided for a richer study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews provided a rich description of the participants' lived experience of virtual counseling amid COVID-19. The researcher hoped to review the school counseling action plan documents for both traditional and virtual to provide more detail to the structure of delivery of services, timeline, resources used, and results. It could have clearly demonstrated the difference between their pre/post-COVID-19 work. Lastly, the researcher created reflection notes during the interviews to capture and document the researcher's thoughts.

Interviews

Interviews were used to understand the participant's experience as is it is an occurrence of social interaction between the researcher and a participant (Heppner et al., 2016). The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of seven demographic questions and eleven open-ended questions. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), a broad, general question was asked, followed by several other open-ended questions. The participants were asked to describe their experiences around virtual school counseling. All interviews ranged from 35 to 60 minutes although up to 90 minutes were set aside to ensure each participant had ample time to share his or her experience. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What is your age?

2. What is your gender?

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

4. What is your highest degree earned?

5. What professional licenses and certifications do you hold related to counseling?

6. How long have you been a school counselor? How long have you worked in this school and county?

7. Describe your school demographics.

8. Describe your experiences around virtual school counseling.

9. How has your role changed since COVID-19?

10. Describe your current caseload. How many in-person students? Digital students?

11. Discuss any activities/interventions/practices utilized to support students socially and emotionally in a virtual setting.

12. Describe any ASCA National Model components incorporated into your program.

13. Elaborate on the positives as well as challenging issues encountered.

14. Discuss the barriers encountered working with students and families in the virtual setting.

15. What additional support have you received in response to COVID-19? What areas do you still feel you need?

16. Describe any self-care practices utilized during this time and their effectiveness.

17. If you had to evaluate your overall performance during this experience using a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F), how would you rate yourself? Why?

18. Describe your post COVID-19 plans, if any, for continuation of practices implemented during the pandemic. What does that look like?

Questions one through seven were designed to gather demographic information pertaining to each participant. These questions gave a glimpse of who the participant is and where they are professionally. Question eight was designed to be broad and general (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2008) contended that asking this would help gather data related to the textual and structural

descriptions of the participant's experience with virtual counseling amid COVID-19 leading to an understanding of common themes and experiences. Questions nine and ten answered research question number one, providing insight into the "how" of the participant's experience. Questions 11 through 16 addressed research question number two, providing valuable insight into the participant's role before and during the pandemic and necessary resources. Finally, questions 17 and 18 addressed research question three, providing insight into the participant's perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding their virtual counseling experience amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Document Analysis

The researcher was unable to review the school counseling action plans for both traditional and virtual for all participants. This could have provided more detail regarding the structure of the delivery of services, timeline, and resources used. The written document was not available; therefore, the researcher inquired verbally within the context of interview question number 11.

Data Analysis

As noted by Creswell (1998), the researcher attempted to create a "layer of analysis" from different sources of data such as interviews, researcher reflections, and documents. The use of direct quotes from the participants were used as well. Horizontalization helped better understand how the participants experienced virtual school counseling during the pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data was reviewed and organized by themes and patterns from the analysis of "significant statements" (Creswell & Poth, p. 79). As noted by Moustakas' (1994) "highly structured approach to analysis", the steps included "(a) identifying significant statements, (b) creating meaning units, (c) clustering themes, and (d) advancing textual and structural

descriptions." (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 238). Next, the researcher used this data to write a textual and structural description. Finally, the researcher used a composite description to report the phenomenon's true essence and presented it in written form. The computer software programs, Temi and NVivo, were also utilized for data analysis. Temi was used to transcribe the interviews, and a student version of NVivo provided by Liberty University was used to help organize information and identify themes.

<div style="text-align:center">Trustworthiness</div>

Credibility

In a phenomenological study, "for Polkinghorne, validation refers to the notion that an idea is well-grounded and well supported" " (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 271). Validation and evaluative criteria suggested by van Manen (2014) and Polkinghorne (1989) are to ask the researcher questions. The overarching question asked by Polkinghorne was, "Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected?" (p. 271). The researcher used these questions to determine the validity and trustworthiness of the research. In addition, member checking was also used. Creswell and Poth (2018) described this strategy as "taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (p. 261). The authors further stated that some researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314) contend that member checking is the "most critical technique for establishing credibility."

Dependability

Creswell & Poth (2018) described dependability as a process of study results being subject to change and instability. This term is used in qualitative research rather than reliability.

Dependability, as noted by the authors, was established in this study through an audit of the research process by memoing throughout the process as well as conducting member checking.

Confirmability

When looking to establish the value of the data collected in a qualitative study, the researcher looked for confirmability. As with dependability, in this study, confirmability was established in this study through an audit of the research process.

Transferability

In qualitative research, the findings of the study must be transferable between the participants and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, transferability was achieved by providing a "thick" or detailed description. The researcher included direct quotes and significant statements from the participants.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting research, there are bound to be some ethical issues to consider. The researcher was aware of and had a plan to address these issues. Ethical considerations considered were (a) storage of data collected, (b) destruction of data collected, and (c) maintaining confidentiality to include participant identity. The researcher transmitted and received information through a secure server using encryption. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and employment sites (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data was stored in locked file cabinets in a locked room. After the successful completion of the dissertation process and conferring the degree, all data will be professionally disposed of immediately. Informed consent forms were provided to all participants detailing all information regarding the study, which was strictly voluntary.

Summary

This chapter provided information regarding the method used to conduct the research study. A transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized to describe the lived experiences of school counselors working virtually amid COVID-19 at the elementary school setting in Georgia. The research questions were revealed along with the participants and the selection process. This section also included procedures used for data collection, data analysis, interview strategy and questions, and the role of investigator bias.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. This chapter will provide a description of all study participants and their experiences regarding virtual school counseling. The results of the data analysis are presented in terms of specific findings. This information is presented in the form of themes (narratives) and tables. Additionally, direct quotes from the participant's interview will be used to further answer the study's research questions. Upon presenting the findings, this section will conclude with a brief chapter summary.

Participants

Participants in this study include five school counselors who are certified and employed in the state of Georgia working in an elementary school setting. All participants willingly volunteered to participate in the study. A portrait of each participant is presented using pseudonyms.

Melinda

Melinda was a 14-year educator in Georgia serving in a K-5 elementary school. During her tenure, she has held several positions within elementary, middle and high schools. It was clear that she has a love for children and their ability to succeed academically. At the time of the interview, she served as the only school counselor in her Title I school. This school was located in an urban setting with an appropriate total enrollment of 450 students. The student population mostly consisted of 90% African American students. Elaborating on her virtual experience, Melinda shared that "40% of the students were virtual and 60% attended in-person". "Oh, I hate it" were her genuine feelings of the experience as this was her only experience with virtual school

counseling. She felt there were "issues everyday". Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Melinda felt her role "changed in a sense" but not much.

Damion

Prior to becoming a school counselor, Damion served in the United States military. He also worked as a mental health practitioner in which he is licensed and nationally certified. His first experience as a school counselor was in the state of Alaska. Upon returning to Georgia, he acquired Georgia certification as a school counselor. When interviewed, Damion had served as a school counselor for five and a half years. Being in his third year as a school counselor at his current school, this was his first experience with virtual school counseling. Damion worked in a Suburban Title I elementary school with approximately "44 white or Caucasian students, 13 Asian students, approximately 70 or so Hispanic students. And there are about 750 odd African American students, about four Native American, and about six students that identify as having two or more ethnicities". Damion served "grades three, four, and five with a "caseload of roughly about 551 students" in which more than half are virtual learners. Although "we are nearing the one year mark of doing virtual school counseling", Damion chose to "utilize it as a way to do individual meetings and classroom or whole group guidance". In light of the pandemic, Damion did not think his role had changed; however, he felt "more responsibilities have been added" to include "doing check-ins with parents and students who may have any difficulties at the moment". It was evident that Damion was passionate about the students and families he served. This was demonstrated by his willingness to make himself available to them beyond school hours to ensure they had what was needed.

Cherry

Cherry was in her fifth year as a school counselor at her current school, although she had been employed with the district for "10 official years". Prior to working as a school counselor,

Cherry gained valuable experience as a district level employee. The school is located "in rural Georgia and is a very small school". There are appropriately 280 elementary students in the school. Cherry's school differs in that it is a Title I "Pre-K-12 school with less than 500 students". Therefore, the entire district is considered Title I and "all of the students are free and reduced lunch". Cherry's role has drastically changed due to the pandemic as well as other factors. This year, Cherry has the charge of serving all students in the building Pre-K-12 whereas previously, she was only the high school counselor. She stated that with this shift coupled with the pandemic, her "job duties now are mostly encompassed with the social, emotional aspect". Due to the pandemic, all students in the district were "100% virtual the whole year". Cherry describes her experience as "very limited in terms of this is our first year doing virtual counseling and it's only due to the pandemic". She further explained that "it is not by choice; it is by force". For this study, we focused on her counseling experiences and duties with the elementary students.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle has been a school counselor for 12 years with two years in her current school. The Title I school is situated in an urban area. The total student enrollment is "approximately 370 students which consists of 97% black, 2% white, and 1% multi-racial or Asian". Gabrielle serves all grade levels Pre-K-5. At the time of the interview, all students and staff were 100% virtual. As of March 1st, some will choose either to come back in person or remain digital. The projection was 80% returning in-person and 20% remaining virtual. As a result, of the pandemic, Gabrielle like many other Georgia educators was forced to work virtually. She acknowledges this was her first encounter with virtual school counseling. However, she admits to "using more virtual platforms" and find them to be "very safe". She refers to herself as well as school counselors in general as "a Jack of all trades".

Lashaun

Lashaun is the veteran educator of all the participants. She has 17 years of experience, 14 years as a school counselor and 3 years as a teacher. As we spoke, I felt her passion and zeal for her chosen profession as well as her students. Lashaun is a prior recipient of the prestigious RAMP (Recognized ASCA Model Program) award presented by ASCA. She has served in leadership capacities at the local and state levels to advocate for the profession and share with her colleagues. Through our interview, I learned that her school district also had the Title I designation. Her school demographics consisted of "80% African American, maybe 10% White, and 10% Hispanic" with a total enrollment of about 550-560 students. Lashaun talked about "telling our story" referring to the difference between her school and others in the district. At the time of the interview, the school had a total special education population of 90 students. This is due to the special programs offered to students throughout the district and surrounding districts. The school is located in a suburban area. During this pandemic, Lashaun had her first experience with virtual school counseling. As it was a shift for her, she appeared to seize the moment by embracing change.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. Upon completion of all interviews, analysis of the data collected commenced. Initially, each transcript was reviewed several times to help identify themes. After analyzing the data in NVivo, several themes became apparent. This section provides a synopsis of those themes and subthemes.

Theme Development

Five dominant themes and eight subthemes emerged from the data collected. (Table 3).
The themes were identified by reading the transcripts numerous times, coding significant words
and statements in NVivo using nodes. Using significant statements and narrative from the
participants, the themes and subthemes are displayed in Table 3 with a brief discussion to follow.

Table 3

Theme and Subthemes

Themes	Subtheme
Adaptability	Role
	Program Delivery
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	None
Communication	Parents
Technology	Devices
	Internet Accessibility
	Training
Engagement	Staff Attendance
	Student Attendance & Participation

Adaptability

Immediately in this phase, the first theme which emerged was adaptability. As noted in
some form by all participants, "these are unprecedented times". Reality as they knew it was
performing school counseling duties in the brick and mortar setting. For all, this was their first
true experience with virtual school counseling. Some expressed the difficulties of doing so in a

pandemic facing multiple issues while others sought out the positives. The areas in which adaptability was prominent for these school counselors were role and program delivery.

Role. The school counselors expressed their thoughts concerning the changes, if any, to their role. The consensus revealed that their role "had not changed" but rather "evolved to meet the needs of our population". In that regard, "more responsibilities were added" or the "focus of the work shifted". Cherry stated, "The majority of my time when students were in the building was academic and career oriented". However, during COVID-19, the focus was "mostly encompassed with the social emotional aspect" due to students "feeling anxious". Other increased or added responsibilities included "being a greater resource for staff and parents".

Program Delivery. Participants elaborated on the delivery of their program components during COVID-19 to include "being added to the specials rotation", "feeling like a teacher doing daily student check-ins" as well as "teaching more lessons", and delivering the lessons. Some continued to deliver lessons in-person and/or virtually. Participants expressed their creativity in offering individual counseling via Teams, Zoom, and sometimes by phone. Virtual platforms were used to record and post lessons such as Canvas, and Google Classroom. Other resources utilized in program delivery were Flipgrid, Google docs, YouTube, and other social media. The modalities used most for program delivery were individual counseling and classroom lessons (synchronous and asynchronous). Small groups were not implemented by the participants due to "not wanting to conduct small groups in a virtual setting". The "risk of confidentiality was too great". Gabrielle stated, "I'm trying not to do groups virtually. There are some FERPA implications there because you cannot say who's in that room with them [the students]".

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL has been widely focused on during COVID-19 through many schools, including the school sites of the participants of this study. One participant stated, "we have had students that have been impacted in different ways due to COVID". Some families even experienced death due to COVID-19. Some participants expressed the impact of "having parents and grandparents of students die from COVID-19". This not only impacted the students' attendance but "their social emotional well-being". As a result of this, some participants "tried to keep it [school] engaging and try to have something different that's not just academic, but really speaks to the whole child, the social, emotional, the character building, all of that". They utilized things like "virtual game days with friends and staff", "literature based lessons" to teach SEL, and implementing programs such as Second Step. According to Gabrielle, "Second Step is a social emotional program that we utilize with every student in the district. Every building from elementary through high school have lessons on the same topics but at different levels".

Communication

As the interviews progressed, it became evident that effective communication was essential to the overall success of the students as well as the comprehensive school counseling program during this time. Some of the participants expressed major concerns with communication during the pandemic and the limitations placed on them due to it. In further analyzing the data, the communication theme emerged as a critical area with parental communication as a subtheme.

Parents. "Gabrielle said, "we still have a lot of parents who are not comfortable with their child coming to the building. And so I think I've had a greater role of communication with

parents, even grandparents". As stated by Damion, there was an increase in conducting "daily check-ins with parents who reached out for themselves as well as their students regarding any difficulties at the moment". Communication with the parents "increased" as students were not in the buildings and most "too young to email, have a phone, or advocate for themselves". Basically, the "parents were in the role as teachers and needed on-going support and instruction". The participants found themselves "making more phone calls to parents and having more parent meetings" to keep parents informed and to "support the teachers and administration in reaching parents. Overall, during the pandemic, the participants agreed that it was a time of "greater communication with parents, grandparents, and providing that support for them".

Additionally, "another barrier has been just communicating with parents who may not speak English". This proved to be an area of difficulty when trying to support parents or effectively communicate with them. Fortunately, the participants had access to "district interpreters" or staff in their building who speak Spanish or a different language.

Technology

As expected, there were numerous issues with technology. Participants indicated "this was one of the biggest issues encountered during this pandemic". Issues with technology during their "new normal" was considered "a constant problem and source of frustration for staff, students, and parents". Some participants shared that their schools "operate 100% virtually since the beginning of the pandemic" while some may be utilizing "a virtual and in-person model but was all virtual at one point". As this theme developed, two subthemes emerged.

Devices. Because the work of staff and students had shifted to a digital platform, it was imperative to have "working devices for all students". Among the districts of the participants,

"all students were able to receive a device", if needed. The issues consisted of "not being able to offer everyone a device immediately", "outdated devices" and "the functionality of the device". Devices "were often not working or needing some type of repair" and "constantly being switched out". In some instances, the issues were "unforeseeable or of no fault of the students". Nevertheless, there was "some negligence on the students' part". In these cases, "the parents are financially responsible for the repair or replacement of the device, which caused more undue stress and frustration."

Internet Accessibility. Internet was "very limited" in some areas, especially in the rural areas. According to Cherry, "due to the area being so rural, woody, or a lot of homes being mobile homes, tin roofs and those kinds of things, connectivity is a big hindrance". Hotspots were made available to help with some of these issues, "our school district has provided hotspots to pretty much every student who requested one". Even with hotspots installed, students, staff, and parents still occasionally encountered internet connectivity problems. Sometimes the "connectivity was delayed" or "would abort spontaneously" for periods of time. At other times, students were "not able to connect at all". When this happened, "unplugged activities" or "printed packets" were made available to students "to include counseling activities as well as academic materials".

Training. As the shift to technology occurred, so did the learning curve for staff, students, and parents. This new learning environment and platform called for additional training for staff in areas such as "the software and programs used to reach the students socially, emotionally, and academically". Teachers and counselors received training on things such as "Zoom, Google Classroom, Outlook, Google Teams, and more". Specific trainings for counselors were held to "address providing counseling programs and services virtually".

Students and parents also had to be trained on the platform used for instruction and for some, "simply on how to use the devices and hotspots". Gabrielle recalled "asking parents would they like to have training on the platforms that we're utilizing with the children so that parents won't be afraid of the technology".

Engagement

The last theme to emerge is engagement. During the pandemic, attendance and participation issues seemed to increase. These issues were reported among staff as well as students. Unfortunately, this impacted the several aspects such as "staff morale and student achievement". Gabrielle contended, "In regards to attendance, we're experiencing what everybody else all over the state, probably all over the United States is experiencing, this is just where we are".

Staff Attendance. Staff attendance decreased during this time as "some teachers and staff members were afraid to enter the building". This was partly due to having "pre-existing conditions, having loved ones with serious illnesses, and a fear of getting COVID-19". Melinda recounted "having to substitute for teachers who were out and not being fully available for counseling tasks was very discouraging and exhausting". Securing substitutes outside of the building was "very difficult to say the least" as teachers and staff went out on leave.

Student Attendance and Participation. Cherry commented, "with the school system and department of education waiving attendance, we try to monitor as best we can. We also have our truancy officer readily available" Issues were cited with virtual students as well as in-person students. One concern was that "parents need to hold students accountable, making sure students

do complete work, making sure that their student is on [attending], not just on Zoom, but actively participating". Students were also absent due to personal and family illness.

Research Question Responses

The three research questions for this study were intended to capture the lived experiences of school counselors employed in elementary schools in Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was achieved by focusing on the "how" of the participants' experience, providing valuable insight into the role before and during the pandemic as well as necessary resources. The response also provided insight into the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding their virtual counseling experience amid COVID-19.

Research Question 1

"How were school counselors able to continue to meet the social and emotional needs of their students?" During the pandemic, the participants saw their roles as "evolving" or "shifting more towards the social-emotional aspect". Although, they were now working in a virtual format, the participants were able to still meet these social-emotional needs of their students. Interventions such as Second Step were utilized systematically to deliver lessons to the students through a virtual platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This program addressed issues such as problem solving, conflict resolution, and feelings. Damion reflected on his experience with this as "using Second Step to come up with SEL lessons sometimes adjusting to make it fit the social, emotional learning realm". He stated that it was helpful as "they [the students] were taught to utilize what is called a step method of solving problems which is simply stating the problem without blame, thinking of some solutions that are safe and respectful, exploring consequences, and then picking the best choice".

Other ways the participants were able to meet these needs were through daily check-ins with the students just to ask "how are you feeling today" as recalled by Gabrielle. Hosting virtual games days were also used to offer a time for students to connect with staff and their peers. Virtual recognition programs such as Character Kid of the Week recognized them [students] for their accomplishments big and small. Likewise, during this time, regular counseling lessons were still delivered. Some participants were placed on the specials or connections rotation. This increased the number of classes normally taught. Some decided to utilize this time to teach on topics such as stress management, coping skills, personal safety, and grief. Lashaun stated:

> One of the lessons we provided was on grief. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, we did have students who lost their parents. And even so, we've had students who lost their parents during the pandemic, but it was not related to COVID-19. I would hope that just in general, the lessons provided some social, emotional support for them.

Other resources and online platforms used to deliver the lessons or specific components include virtual counseling offices, Bitmojis, iPads, iMovie, children's books, Google classroom, Google voice, Kahoot, Flipgrid, and Canvas in addition to Zoom, Teams and Meets. Additionally, Student Support Team (SST) meetings, Multi-Tiered Support Systems (MTSS) meetings and individual counseling were utilized.

As a way of being intentional with the services delivered, some of the participants conducted needs assessments at their schools and shared the information with all stakeholders including principals. This enabled the participants to make data-driven decisions regarding their comprehensive counseling programs. In doing so, some participants discussed the ASCA components used in their program to help meet student needs. Damion and Lashaun mentioned

using the annual administrative conference and Mindsets and Behaviors to align lessons with the

ASCA standards. Damion explained:

> So, currently, we do make sure that the ASCA model is utilized. The biggest component
>
> is the use of time. However, our use of time never really equates to the actual 80, 20 of
>
> 80% direct, 20% indirect. We're probably in the neighborhood of about 35 to 40%
>
> indirect and the other 55 to 60% being direct, just simply due to the state of what we're
>
> dealing with students.

Lashaun shared that:

> In 2009, I was working at XYZ middle school and our school earned RAMP. So, I am a
>
> recipient of the prestigious recognized ASCA model program award. I would say that my
>
> program has all of the components of an ASCA model program. One of the components
>
> that I will need to work on as I go into second semester is small groups.

Other participants reported using ASCA components such as the annual calendar, the lesson plan

template and "whatever mandates are sent out on a list by the district".

> Lastly, in meeting the social and emotional needs of students, the participants continued

to provide students and families with resources such as mental health counseling sources and

referrals to include the Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL). Participants stated that students

have suffered great losses including the death of loved ones, homes, and more. Gabrielle stated:

> At this time with a lot of students experiencing loss, we've had to gravitate towards
>
> grievance resources especially to gauge how they are feeling right now. I had about four
>
> students that have lost a parent in just the last two months.

Further providing support in these situations, Lashaun stated that her "district has provided a quick guide to things such as anxiety and grief and loss". Other resources include on site mental health agencies as described by Cherry.

> So, I have partnered with New Horizon, who is part of our community resource, to provide services that are beyond my scope of expertise. We've really focused more now on the social emotional aspect and the whole child. They have been a Godsend because this allows me to focus on things like 'oh, they're not my friend, I'm tired, I'm sick that kind of thing. They focus on suicidal ideations, depression, low self-esteem. So, this allows me to stay within my will house and refer the other things. When we have referrals, they come to the school and conduct the intake session, especially if parents do not have adequate technology, internet or just prefer face-to-face. In addition to the mental health services they provide to the students and families, they also help facilitate small groups at the school. This works out because it gives the students a chance to get to know and interact with them prior to needing any additional services. For intensive services, they meet with them for 30-45 minutes weekly; the students are evaluated by a doctor, especially if they need medications, and there is a 3-hour intake process with the parents in which they check for or help secure insurance benefits.

Research Question 2

"What challenges were faced by school counselors during and after the transition to a virtual setting?" As schools across the nation made the shift to virtual learning, school counselors were among staff who were impacted. The participants of this study faced multiple challenges such as working with limited resources and direction, monitoring student attendance, and dealing with student engagement and lack of participation. Cherry stated that:

It is difficult for them [students] in their stamina, to be on camera and just sit there for long periods of time. We try to give brain breaks to help. Their schedule is 9 to 2 virtually. So, they have to be in front of the camera from nine to two, with the exception of a 30-minute lunch.

Lashaun echoed this by saying "we have, I think decreases in engagement when we're on the computer and devices all day". According to Gabrielle, "they do not communicate with teachers, they do not pick up packets despite having devices, but will not use the device, have internet accessibility, but will not use it. And right now they are building up absences." Damion thought that "the barriers are accessibility and accountability". He stated:

To speak furthermore, on the accessibility, I think a good majority of our students either don't have a device or if they have a device it is either a non-working device and, or not having adequate internet. I think a lot of our students have internet, however, it is just not able to support the bandwidth needed for Zoom. Accountability, I would say comes from the parents part. These are some of the barriers of having parents to make sure that they hold students accountable, making sure students do complete work, making sure that their student is on, not just on the Zoom, but actively participating. Those are some of the challenges that I find or barriers every day, especially when speaking to parents they simply state, they know the child is on the Zoom; however, the child isn't producing any work. So, holding the child and the parent accountable. Holding the child accountable for the work and for participation, and then the parent being accountable for making sure that they do the parenting piece by making sure that student is present.

Another challenge noted by Damion was how counseling lessons were sometimes disregarded by teachers. He stated that:

Teachers sometimes will negate the counseling lessons. Meaning that teachers will not

allow you the opportunity to present counseling lessons either because they forgot, or

they don't feel it's as important as reading, science, math, and social studies at that time.

Other challenges were related to limited devices, devices not working properly, old devices, parents not being tech savvy, and internet accessibility. Gabrielle stated that at her school, "with one grade level, we have very old Chromebooks. Kindergarten through third grade have the newest computers. Next year, fourth and fifth will be updated. There is a back order on the Chromebooks". Also, challenges with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other COVID-19 safety measures were an issue for some of the participants. Damion viewed this as a support that is still needed. He stated, "there needs to be more supplies like face shields, desk visors. I still have yet to receive one. However, there are other personnel in the school that have. I have daily interactions with students just as the teachers". Some supports provided to meet other challenges were receiving adequate technology devices such as headsets, laptops, multiple computer screens and professional development on different technology resources participants were expected to use. These challenges included training on different applications like Zoom, Teams, and Canvas. As challenging as this was, the participants agreed that in order to take care of everything and everyone else, they had to first take care of self. To accomplish this, they engaged in things they loved and had an interest in doing to include exercising, auto hobbies, reading, self-pampering at the spa with manicures, pedicures, and massages, listening to jazz, gospel and/or the sounds of nature, learning about and practicing the art of meditation, guarding sleep time, listening to the body by taking care of medical needs (doctor and dentist appointments), debriefing with other school counselors, and keeping a gratitude journal.

Research Question 3

"What were school counselors' perceptions and attitudes toward virtual school counseling?" Although Melinda expressed that she did not like the virtual experience, the other participants "embraced the positive" and thought there were some positive things that came about as a result of the virtual experience overall. Damion stated:

> It allows me to be available and accessible for students during lunch for face-to-face sessions. It is really easy to schedule a meeting really quick without having to go and pull a student out of class or track them down when I'm available. So there are some ups and some downs. For the most part, I think it is pretty positive. However, there are some negatives.

Cherry and Lashaun agreed that students learning to navigate a virtual platform and learn online etiquette early on is a positive especially since so many postsecondary programs are completely or partially online. Lashaun thought it [the virtual experience during the pandemic] helped students build resiliency skills and learn responsibility. Another positive she expressed was homebound students having access to instruction. Lashaun explained:

> The student wanted to come to school; however, due to medical conditions the student was not able to come to school due to needing a personal nurse. Since the pandemic and we've been on Canvas and on Microsoft Teams, I've seen that student in class. I think that has been something we have needed for a long time for students who have chronic and critical illness; for them to interact with other students. And this student has been doing work and submitting work. It has been awesome because he's in the comfort of his own home with a nurse and still able to participate. So, I think that is a positive.

The participants further expressed their opinions of virtual school counseling by evaluating their overall performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 4 shows the letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F that each participate used to rate themselves.

Table 4

Participant Self-Evaluation Ratings

Participants	Letter Grade
Melinda	C
Damion	B
Cherry	B
Gabrielle	A
Lashaun	A-

Participants also expounded on why they chose the rating shown above. The explanations are as follows:

Melinda stated:

> I would say probably a C because I know if the circumstances were not what they are, then I would be able to do more interactive, more hands-on things with the kids. But because we are virtual, the majority of them are virtual. Also, when I do go into the classroom, we do not do anything with paper or pencil. Less touching as possible. So, it's all lecture. So, I would say a C only because of the COVID restraints that we have and not being able to do anything fun or interactive.

Damion stated:

> I think in being modest, I would rate myself a B simply because I know there are things that I usually would do, however, due to the current pandemic situation, I can't. And I

know I could do those things had we not been in a pandemic. So, it seems as though I'm

not doing as much as I can, such as group apps programs that I usually hold for the entire

school, having parents in the building to help do various things, and other fundraising

activities, and things that I usually help out with are not able to be done simply because

of the pandemic. I do think I am still very effective with delivering classroom guidance,

crisis management, as needed, as well as interventions and supports for staff. So I think I

would just say a modest B.

Cherry stated:

I would rate myself a B and the reason I would rate myself a B is because I think I

flourish more in person with my students, with my parents, with my teachers. However, I

think this is effective because you can reach more people at the same time. For example, I

used to do my advisement by going to multiple classes taking a whole day. Now, I can

see two, three classes at one time. So I've been effective in that. So I think I get kudos

and points for that. And the only reason I didn't get myself an A is, again, that personal

experience you get when you're talking to your students in a small group setting. One-on-

one individual counseling definitely is not to the level where it would be virtually,

because if I'm face-to-face, I can see all your body expression, access your mood.

Students can lie to my face virtual or in person, but I'm going to pick up on more if we

are physically in the same room. This would allow me the opportunity to offer or provide

immediate support. So, I think this can be a barrier for some. For some students, this may

work but others may wonder who else is watching this or are you recording it, or who

else is there. They're hesitant. They're not as open.

Gabrielle stated:

A, of course. Why would I rate myself as B, C, D or F? First of all, there really is no

measure. If we really had to put a rating system to it, there's never been a time like this,

such as COVID. I think I've had to think outside the box. So, if I were to ask my parents,

what grade I get. They would tell me A.

Lashaun stated:

I would have to rate myself as an A. There's always room for improvement, So, I would

give an A minus just because we have an app that we're supposed to be using in our

district to document every single thing that we do during the day. And it has your date

and it has your time, we're supposed to keep track of every single thing on the app. It's a

record keeping software called S C U T A which stands for School Counselor Use of

Time Analysis. With the increase in parent contacts, it is hard to document everything as

it happens and then the next day you may have forgotten. I certainly would give myself

an A minus because I would like to improve on documentation.

Post COVID-19, the participants shared practices that they are during now during their virtual

experience that they would like to keep in their program. Those practices or activities included:

(a) virtual parent and student meetings, (b) individual counseling and check-ins via Zoom, (c)

using a desk divider, (d) using single item or disposable manipulatives, (e) closing their doors to

decrease distractions, (f) conducting multiple classroom lessons or advisement sessions at one

time, (g) virtual presentations with guest speakers, virtual guidance lessons and in-house small

groups, (h) recording of lessons, asynchronous activities, online counseling referrals for students,

parents, staff, and (i) virtual counseling offices and Bitmojis.

Lastly, as stated by Cherry,

You have to think outside the box and be willing to go above and beyond. And that's

what we do in this profession. It is not an in-the-box kind of profession. If you're in a

box, then you're in the wrong profession because our kids are never going to fit into that

normal mold that you think all kids, all families, and definitely, staff members to be.

Summary

This chapter provided a rich portrait of the participants in this study. Additionally, themes

and subthemes were revealed from the data analysis process utilized. The data collection tool was

semi-structured interviews. Next, the three research questions were answered using the themes,

subthemes, and select participant quotes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. Participants for this study consisted of five Georgia school counselors employed in the elementary setting. This chapter provides a summary of the study's findings, a discussion of the findings in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature, the study's methodological and practical implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the study's five participants. Upon analyzing the data, five themes and eight subthemes emerged describing the virtual school counseling experience of the participants during COVID-19. Themes were as follows: (a) adaptability, (b) communication, (c) social emotional learning (SEL), (d) technology, and (e) engagement. The subthemes were: (a) role, (b) program delivery, (c) parents, (d) devices, (e) internet accessibility, (f) training, (g) staff attendance, and (h) student attendance and participation. These themes and subthemes were pertinent in answering the study's research questions.

Research question one asked, *How were school counselors able to continue to meet the social and emotional needs of their students?* Despite this being a very challenging time for the participants, they were able to continue to address the social and emotional needs of their students. In addition to providing some of the regularly used counseling curriculum, participants delivered SEL lessons on topics that were data-driven. These lessons and activities were conducted through individual counseling and classroom lessons. Some of the participants also

conducted daily check-ins with students to gauge their emotions allowing them to express their feelings. As this was done, additional support such as outside resources and referrals may have been offered. Students were also engaged in virtual meetings to play games and interact with their peers and counselors as a way of staying connected socially. Several online resources were utilized for these activities as well as children's books.

Research question two asked, *What challenges were faced by school counselors during and after the transition to a virtual setting?* Multiple challenges were encountered as a result of the pandemic. With initial school closures and the shift to a virtual platform, school counseling as the participants knew it was obsolete. They then had to learn to operate in a "new normal" which included performing their duties and assignments virtually. As one participant said it, "this was by force not choice". Some of the challenges encountered were learning new technology, and technological issues, working with limited resources and direction, monitoring student attendance, and dealing with lack of participation. All of these factors contributed to the challenging experiences of virtual school counseling during COVID-19. Not only did the participants have to shift their work to a virtual setting, they also had to take on additional responsibilities such as contacting parents and tracking down students who were not showing up virtually. They were also faced with teachers not allowing them into their classes to present lessons as they did not think they were as "important" as the core subject areas at that point. The greatest challenges were the internet accessibility and a lack of engagement among students. The participants had to be very strategic and intentional in practicing self-care to avoid compassion fatigue and burn out as they continued to meet the needs of their students, staff, and families.

Research question three asked, *What were school counselors' perceptions and attitudes toward virtual school counseling?* Most participants reported having some positive experiences

despite the many challenges. Overall, they embraced the work and continued to be supportive and sought creative ways to help students and their families as well as staff. Participants reported that virtually, they were able to increase the number of students served at a given time as well as multiple special populations. Virtual counseling also presented various opportunities that may not have occurred in-person such as guest speakers and other presentations. The self-rating of performance during COVID-19 among the participants averaged in the higher category. They explained that given the situation and resources provided, they were able to rise to the challenge and perform well. As a result, there were several practices and interventions implemented that participants would like to keep in place post COVID-19 such as virtual parent meetings and student lessons, and certain safety precautions.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

Empirical

As previously stated, it was discovered that less than 20% of the empirical studies published within 1990 and the 2000s, represented qualitative research as related to counseling (Berrios & Lucca, 2006; Ponterotto, 2005; Ponterotto et al., 2008). During that time, there were strong criticisms regarding qualitative research in counseling and shifts began to occur. However, years later, its relevance began to grow. This was found to be true in conducting research for this study. Historically, there are no studies that address virtual school counseling during a pandemic. This is a new era, uncharted territory. Therefore, finding literature relating directly to the topic was quite difficult. Related topics were researched to create a broader view as closely related as possible.

As found by Alexander et al. (2003), the role of the school counselor was debated within the school counseling literature. The debate centered around the focus of the school

counselors work in the school setting solely being academic in nature, exclusively mental health, or a combination of both. The researchers found that there was an increased awareness of system influences which encompassed both avenues, mental health as well as academic. The focus was on relationships and reducing barriers both institutionally and environmentally that hinders the academic progress of students. In this study, this was concisely the role of the five participants. They played many roles such as advocate, mental health provider, community resource provider, liaisons between school and home as they continued to meet the social emotional, career, and academic needs of their students. Consistent with the literature, school leaders, parents, and community members began to perceive school counselors' training, skillsets, and roles as imperative in regards to the social-emotional well-being and academic achievement.

While there are some empirical studies regarding virtual counseling, this qualitative study adds to the body of qualitative literature. It will extend on the studies to address the experiences of virtual school counseling during times of a pandemic. As supported by the literature, crisis counseling is the second top priority relative to the role of the school counselor (Zalaquett & Chatter, 2012). The authors found crisis counseling to be an important intervention to offer and provide support and assistance for students in crisis situations. This study was centered amid a crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. If ever there was a time for crisis counseling, this was it. As mentioned by Zalaquett and Chatter, school counselors provided mental health counseling, unwavering support, and crisis counseling to students and families in need.

The accomplishment of this task was not easy. The participants in this study shifted from their traditional mode of delivery to virtual due to sudden closures of school. However,

as suggested by Steele (2017) school counselors were able to continue to deliver their

programs on a virtual platform by utilizing asynchronous services, Zoom, and other formats.

Findings from a study conducted by Herold (2013), revealed some counselors viewed using

an online platform and offering online counseling as a challenge. Participants in this study

initially found this to be true as they scrambled for ideas and a new way to reach their

students. There were many challenges such as diminished connectedness demonstrated by

previous researchers (Lapan et al., 2014). There were also confidentiality issues (Herold,

2013), counselor's lack of training or competency (Glasheen et al., 2013), and human

interaction, internet access, and commitment (Lapan et al., 2014). Despite all of the shifting

and challenges faced, the participants were able to practice self-care strategies. Among those

chosen were also some suggested by Bradley et al. (2013) such as seeking personal and

professional help, exercising, getting adequate sleep, and maintaining a well-balanced diet.

Theoretical

The methodological framework this study was situated in was phenomenology as

explained by Edmund Husserl, more specifically, a transcendental phenomenology. This

research design allowed for the capturing of the participants' accounts of their virtual school

counseling experience. As explained by Yuksel et al. (2015), phenomenology, just as this study

did, sought the reality in the narratives of the participants experience. This proved to be an

appropriate design as it allowed for rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the school

counselors. This was well supported by the findings revealed. The counselors were able to

express the positives and challenges of working during this pandemic in a format unfamiliar to

them while still meeting the needs of students. Using this theoretical approach adds depth to the

vivid accounts of the participants' day to day encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic. As

virtual school counseling was experienced through lens of the participants, various themes and subthemes emerged as contended by Creswell and Poth (2018) adding to the limited body of qualitative research in the field of counseling (Heppner et al., 2016). Moustakas (1994) found that the phenomenological research approach assists the researcher learn about a phenomenon through the lens of those who experienced it.

<div align="center">**Implications**</div>

Empirical

The study addressed the gap in qualitative literature by exploring the lived experiences of elementary school counselors working virtually during the pandemic, how they met their students' social and emotional needs, and their perceptions of virtual school counseling. It adds to the current literature on how virtual school counseling can impact the work of school counselors. This study confirms that school counselors are indeed integral components of school leadership as they provide for the academic, social, and emotional aspect of student development and achievement.

Virtual school counseling has been explored in previous studies; however, it has not been explored in regards to a pandemic. This in itself makes the study valuable in that light. The participants were instrumental in the adjustment of school during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were able to adapt their practices and programs for such a time with limited research or literature to guide the process.

Empirically, this provides a blueprint for further research and practice while it adds to the existing qualitative work in the counseling profession, specifically in a school setting. It serves as a model to show the importance of qualitative literature in this field. Participants in this study willingly shared their experiences to further advance the field of school counseling in literature.

Their detailed accounts vividly portrayed the challenges, joys, and transitions of school counseling.

Practical

The findings of this study can be positively used to inform the practice of school counseling. School counselors provide specialized services for students in the school setting which cannot be rendered by other school staff. For this reason, it is imperative that school counselors are competent. Drawing upon the findings, school counselors can build their repertoire of skills and resources to further assist students in need. The study offers ways to become involved in the overall structure and planning during a pandemic or other challenging situation. Suggestions can also be provided for the training and preparation of established counselors as well as counselors-in-training. In terms of school administration, it provides a framework of how best to utilize school counselors. When school counselors are given an opportunity to lead, to work within their scope, and provide the necessary tools, their work can be very impactful. This assertion was illustrated throughout this study by the participants as they shifted to a virtual platform to delivery services to students. Their effectiveness in delivery services and lessons, assisted students and families during a most difficult time.

This study also showed that by empowering parents, students could further succeed. This did not come without challenges such as parents in rural or poverty-stricken areas not having the adequate basic resources needed. These parents experienced a lack of food, childcare, financial loss, and medical care. This was in addition to the barriers which already existed. The study provided a framework for working with families in need to overcome barriers to education which can adapted to non-pandemic times. Participants went above and beyond to ensure that parents

had proper training on technology used, had access to their services, were equipped with the technology and internet service needed.

Additionally, this study confirms that school counselors contribute significantly in influencing the culture and climate of the school. As working in a pandemic proved to be stressful and uncertain at times, the school counselors were called upon to encourage, uplift, and inspire others in the building. Words of encouragement were rendered to staff regularly through positive messages or affirmations. Likewise, the school counselors were present and available to assist where they were needed without fail.

Delimitations and Limitations

Throughout this study, the focus was to learn about a phenomenon that was pertinent to the profession of school counseling. The delimitations were only including school counselors in Georgia, limiting the participants to school counselors employed in an elementary school setting only, choosing a phenomenological study over a case study, and defining the time frame of the participants experience to August 1, 2019, to December 31, 2020. These delimitations were designed to ensure that all participants had experienced the phenomenon of virtual school counseling and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, the focus of the design portrayed a rich portrait of their individual experiences and identified their commonalities.

Limitations of the study included the race and gender of the participants. All five participants were African Americans and only one male. Perhaps, a more diverse sample population would have added to the cultural diversity and insights of the participants. Additionally, the number of participants, although adequate, was limited. Increasing the number of participants could produce richer data. Participants interviewed could include other stakeholders, including the administrative team, teachers, parent, and students. Another

limitation was that all of the schools where participants were employed were Title I schools. Having non-Title I schools included could have provided a different perspective of student needs and a rich comparison of resources. A final limitation is the timing of the research. Although the pandemic began in March 2020, the research study was conducted in spring of 2021. The results may have differed if the study was conducted during spring or summer 2020.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. There were five participants involved; however, including more participants could add to the depth and credibility of the study. This could have a greater impact on the profession as a whole. It would provide multiple accounts to learn from and impact practice. Other recommendations include broadening the criteria for study participants to include school counselors at each level: (a) elementary school, (b) middle school, and (c) high school, as well as extending participation among a greater region or all states, actively recruiting a more diverse sample group in regard to gender and age, as well as representation from different types of schools to include public, private, charter, and even existing online programs. Lastly, concerning research design, conducting a case study is another way in which to focus more on the totality of the virtual school counseling experience of a single school counselor as it relates to the pandemic. Doing so could involve other stakeholders such as the principal, students and parents. Data collection sources are journals, interviews, and focus groups. A mixed methods approach is also appropriate as an assessment to focus on school counselor satisfaction and burnout, school counselor wellness, and compassion fatigue. The final recommendation would be to explore the school counselor's experience over a longer period rather as opposed to the near end.

Summary

This phenomenological study was conducted to understand and vividly portray the lived experiences of five elementary school counselors accounts of virtual school counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic in the state of Georgia. The research questions for this study were: 1) How were school counselors able to continue to meet the social and emotional needs of their students? 2) What challenges were faced by school counselors during and after the transition to a virtual setting? and 3) What were school counselors' perceptions and attitudes toward virtual school counseling?

Each participant was interviewed using the same interview protocol (Appendix A). As data was collected and analyzed using the eight steps outlined for conducting phenomenological research as described by Creswell and Poth (2018), five themes and eight subthemes emerged. The use of significant statements and participant quotes shaped the study's results. This study found that the participants' overall experiences were mostly positive during a challenging time when little to no direction was provided initially. All participants felt there were some things they could take away from this experience for continued use in their program for years to come.

Finally, this study provides a practical framework for school counselors working in pandemic and other uncommon situations. As stated by one of the study's participants, "we do not have to reinvent the wheel, we can learn from others". Reiterating the words of Cherry, school counselors have to think "outside the box" as the individual and the profession are experiencing "out of the box" times. As noted by Cherry, "we have to be of the frame of mind that this is the wave of the future. I don't think we are ever returning to what we consider normal or traditional. I think we will always have to encompass some component of being virtual counselors".

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

General Information	
Date	
Time	
Video/Audio Platform	
Recording Method	
Participant Identifier	
Participant Demographics	
Current Age	
Gender	
Race/Ethnicity	
Highest degree earned	
Professional Licenses/certifications	
Length of time as a School Counselor:	
• **At current School**	
• **In Current District**	
School Demographics	
Interview Questions	

1. Describe your experiences around virtual school counseling.
2. How has your role changed since COVID-19?
3. Describe your current caseload. How many in-person students? Digital students?
4. Discuss any activities/interventions/practices utilized to support students socially and emotionally in a virtual setting.
5. Describe any ASCA National Model components incorporated into your program.
6. Elaborate on the positives as well as challenging issues encountered.
7. Discuss the barriers encountered working with students and families in the virtual setting.
8. What additional support have you received in response to COVID-19? What areas do you still feel you need?
9. Describe any self-care practices utilized during this time and their effectiveness.
10. If you had to evaluate your overall performance during this experience using a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F), how would you rate yourself? Why?
11. Describe your post COVID-19 plans, if any, for continuation of practices implemented during the pandemic. What does that look like?

Reflective Notes

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Letter/Email

Dear Fellow School Counselor:

As a student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must have been employed in the State of Georgia as an elementary school counselor between August 1, 2019 – December 31, 2020. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an interview (approximately 60-90 minutes) and member checking (estimated 20-30 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be provided to protect the participants' privacy.

In order to participate, please contact me at ██████████ or █████████████ for more information and to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Participants will receive a $25 VISA gift card.

Sincerely,

Tawonda M. Hunter
Doctoral Candidate
██████████████

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

Title of the Project: Virtual School Counseling Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic
Principal Investigator: Tawonda M. Hunter, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be employed in the state of Georgia as an elementary school counselor between August 1, 2019 – December 31, 2020. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the lived virtual school counseling experience amid COVID-19 for elementary school counselors in Georgia. This study will add to the limited qualitative research literature regarding virtual school counseling. It will also help to inform practice and offer significant implications for future research.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participant in an interview via an online platform or by phone (approximately 60-90 minutes). It will also be audio/video recorded for transcription purposes.
2. Participate in member checking (estimated 20-30 minutes) to check for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Your identity will not be disclosed or how you responded to the interview questions. Pseudonyms will be provided to protect your privacy.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive a $25 VISA gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be pulled and separated from your responses to maintain your anonymity.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Tawonda M. Hunter. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Stacey Lilley, PhD at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researchers will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix D

IRB Approval Letter

January 18, 2021

Tawonda Hunter
Stacey Lilley
Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-353 Virtual School Counseling Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Tawonda Hunter, Stacey Lilley:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at █████████████.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CI

Administrative Chair of Institutional
Research Ethics Office