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**THE EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS PROVIDING VIRTUAL SERVICES  
DURING COVID-19: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

by

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B.S. 2015, State University of New York at New Paltz  
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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

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May 2022

Approved by:

Emily Goodman-Scott (Chair)

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## ABSTRACT

THE EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS DURING COVID-19:

AN EXPLORATION OF MEETING K-12 STUDENT NEEDS

Allison Kathryn Worth  
Old Dominion University, 2022  
Chair: Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott

School counselors are trained in providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to K-12 students. In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic took the world of K-12 education by surprise, forcing school counselors to deliver a virtual school counseling program with little to no time for preparation. School counselors were faced with meeting the seemingly ever-changing needs of K-12 students as social, political, and health concerns evolved throughout the pandemic. Although schools have since begun to reopen their doors, the effects of Covid-19 are far from over. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of United States (U.S.) public school counselors providing virtual services to K-12 students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This valuable insight into the world of virtual school counseling during Covid-19 will serve as a platform for the development of future practices, training, and counselor education curricula.

*Keywords:* school counseling, virtual, Covid-19, K-12 education

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Mom, Dad, Christina, Mikey, and Franklin - thank you for being my support system and for believing in me every step of the way.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

In or around March 2020, Covid-19 forced K-12 schools throughout the United States (U.S.) to close their doors to in-person learning, causing faculty, staff, administrators, students, families, and communities to quickly develop interventions for virtual learning to limit loss of “instruction time” (Varela & Fedynich, 2020, p. 1). Although studies have investigated the impact of Covid-19 with a focus on teacher training and teacher experiences (Hamilton, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020), the experiences of school counselors related to Covid-19 have yet to be explored. School counselors are responsible for serving the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a), making research pertaining to school counseling and the Covid-19 pandemic crucial for K-12 student success.

It could be argued that students required new and additional support due to Covid-19 and the change in learning climate. Covid-19 has brought about new student concerns related to health and safety (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Martin & Sorensen, 2020), social isolation (Hanover Research, 2020), family support (Bansak & Starr, 2021), and academics (Middleton, 2020), all which school counselors are required to address. It is important to note that since Covid-19 is a new phenomenon in the world of education, there is a substantial need for further research to expose Covid-19 related K-12 student needs. While planning and attempting to meet the needs of students during Covid-19, school counselors may have found themselves lacking support, training, and knowledge. In a survey that researched K-12 teachers during Covid-19, results identified additional support teachers required during the pandemic such as strategies to adapt curriculum, virtual lesson planning tools, addressing the loss of hands-on

student learning, social and emotional support strategies, student engagement strategies in the virtual setting, and technical support, to mention a few (Hamilton et al., 2020). Some of these supports also included assisting teachers with meeting the needs of vulnerable populations virtually, such as homeless families and students with disabilities. These findings most likely indicate that school counselors are and were also in need of unique support during Covid-19; however, there is not yet research exploring school counselor experiences related to support.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In school counselor preparation programs, students are trained to provide academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students through a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019a). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly all K-12 students across the U.S. have been required to attend school virtually. Many school counselors who were initially hired to serve students in-person may find themselves having to navigate the new landscape of performing a virtual/hybrid job. Although schools have returned to in-person instruction, some students may choose to remain virtual indefinitely, causing an increased demand for permanent virtual school counseling services. Additionally, students who have returned to in-person or hybrid instruction are faced with challenges related to readjustment within the school environment. School counselors have faced and are currently still facing the challenge of providing and developing a comprehensive school counseling program that addresses Covid-19 related needs and concerns. School counselor preparation and readiness to provide online services and meet the needs of students during Covid-19 varies based on professional support received and training.

To better understand the first-hand experiences of school counselors during Covid-19, I conducted a qualitative, phenomenological investigation using individual interviews. These

interviews provided an understanding of school counselors' experiences during Covid-19, gleaned more information specific to school counselors' experiences with the initial transition to virtual learning, challenges faced while delivering a comprehensive school counseling program, training and support received in preparation for and throughout virtual learning, and the use of technology to access students and families. Findings will inform school counseling practices along with professional development efforts and school counselor education curricula. The following is a brief overview of the literature surrounding school counseling during Covid-19 and the study design and methods.

### **Significance of the Study**

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the K-12 education system including bringing attention to student inequities (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020), mental health needs (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2020), physical health risks and concerns (Pattison et al., 2021), and academic disparities (Hinrichs, 2021). Among the multiple professionals who serve students within the K-12 education system are school counselors. School counselors are trained to provide academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students (ASCA, 2019a). School counselors are in a unique position to meet the needs of students during Covid-19 in that they are the only professionals in the K-12 setting who are both educators and counselors (ASCA, 2020; n.d.).

To plan for potential future school closures due to unforeseen crises (i.e., pandemics, natural disasters, etc.), the reopening of schools post Covid-19, and to account for an increased number of students who are choosing to attend virtual school post Covid-19 (Torchia, 2021), the experiences of school counselors delivering and developing a comprehensive school counseling program during Covid-19 must be explored. Understanding the experiences of school counselors

during Covid-19 can inform school counseling practices during a crisis, aid with school reopening plans, and offer insight into providing students with virtual school counseling in the future. Additionally, the experiences can inform school counselor education programs along with professional development efforts regarding meeting the needs of students during and after school closures and related crises. Thus, to better understand the first-hand experiences of school counseling professionals, the researcher conducted a phenomenological investigation. It is essential that the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 be explored to inform education policies, future support and practices during unpredictable times, counselor education programs, and professional development.

### **Systems Theory**

This study used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as a conceptual framework to explore the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) systems theory assumes an individual is impacted by multiple environmental factors that are within a "nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next" (p. 514). One can conceptualize the role of the school counselor during Covid-19 through the following systems lens: (a) Covid-19 as the overarching system, (b) the U.S. education system as it relates to Covid-19, and (c) stakeholders within the U.S. education system (students, administrators and leaders, teachers, and school counselors).

### **Purpose Statement and Research Focus**

The purpose of this study is to explore the professional experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 related to delivering virtual school counseling services. The research focus is to explore the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19.



## **Research Design**

Phenomenology is an approach used in qualitative research which illustrates participants' first-hand accounts to highlight their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher aims to describe participant first-hand experiences from their perspective while being conscious of how their perception influences overall conclusions made. To best represent participant experiences, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. All interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed. The transcripts underwent Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Kaam's (1959, 1966) data analysis framework to conceptualize participants' lived experiences. Final themes were then discussed to highlight participant experiences and inform future research and practices.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

There are multiple limitations to consider throughout this study. First, Covid-19 is a relatively new phenomenon. Covid-19 is a virus which first took the world by surprise in 2019-2020. The impact of this relatively new phenomenon has yet to be deeply explored in many facets, and especially within the world of school counseling. This study offers an exploratory investigation and a catalyst for future research. As such, the present study is purposefully broad, to capture participants' lived experiences.

Second, it can be challenging for researchers to fully bracket their experiences and perception to capture the lived experiences of others (Creswell, 2006). As a result, the researcher drafted a positionality statement to discuss how their identity relates to the study. Next, although interviews can generate valuable content, using one type of data (individual interviews) as the sole method of data collection can limit the opportunity for data triangulation, and seeing patterns across multiple types of data (e.g., focus group interview, observations, participant

journal, etc.). In the future, the addition of focus groups could capture conversations and interactions between participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). Last, states, cities, and school districts across the U.S. experienced different regulations and varying rates of Covid-19 at different times. Thus, it is important to note that the present study represented the lived experiences of one sample, and the purpose of this phenomenological investigation was not generalization to a broader sample of school counselors. In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct similar studies across various states, regions, and countries.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the term *school counseling professionals* includes graduate level school counseling students, practicing school counselors, district school counselor coordinators, school counseling consultants, and school counselor educators. The term *virtual school counseling* refers to school counseling services provided online, through various virtual platforms, and/or through a hybrid model that utilizes in-person and virtual services. *Virtual learning* represents the K-12 online and hybrid school settings. The term *stakeholders* is used to describe all individuals involved and impacted by the K-12 education system, including but not limited to school counselors, students, families, community members, education support staff, policy makers, teachers, administrators, district leaders, and school counselor educators. Lastly, *coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19)* is a highly contagious virus that first evolved in 2019 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021a) and a pandemic is an “event in which a disease spreads across several countries and affects a large number of people” (National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases [NCIRD], Division of Viral Diseases, 2020, para. 5). For the purposes of this paper, the term *Covid-19* is used to describe both a highly contagious virus and the current pandemic.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

School counselors are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to students (ASCA, 2019a) in all K-12 settings (i.e., in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings). When Covid-19 interrupted the 2019-2020 K-12 school year, school counselors along with many other educators, were required to provide virtual services to students. Covid-19 has not only impacted students' academic, career, social/emotional, financial, and physical health throughout communities (Armitage & Nellums, 2020), but has had a lasting impact on how the U.S. education system will forever function. Thus far, limited research has been conducted to explore the experiences of school counselors related to Covid-19; however, some studies have identified student needs, administration and leadership responses, K-12 teacher experiences, and reopening plans of K-12 schools post the 2019-2020 school year. The lack of school counseling research surrounding Covid-19 is not surprising considering Covid-19 is a relatively new occurrence that is still taking place in 2022, and there are significantly fewer school counselors in districts compared to teachers and administrators. The following literature review will provide an overview of Covid-19 along with research pertaining to the K-12 US education system, students, administration and leadership, teachers, school counselors, and the lasting effects of Covid-19 on the U.S. education system, and will be framed within the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

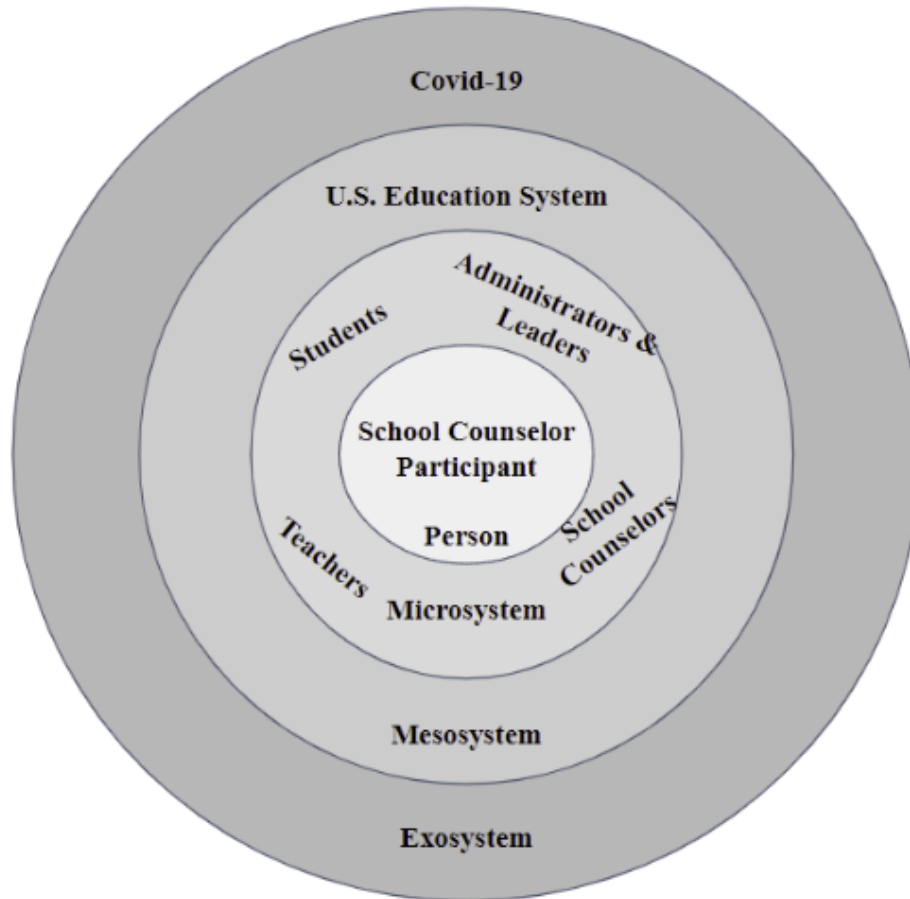
Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory assumes an individual is impacted by multiple environmental factors that are within a "nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next" (p. 514). Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as a conceptual framework, I begin with Covid-19 as the overarching system located within the

exosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes the exosystem as a system “embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there” (p. 515). Covid-19, a global health crisis, impacted societal (e.g., political, health, education, and economic) systems throughout the world and determined how these systems operated. For the purposes of this study, the U.S. education system will be discussed as a system located within the mesosystem, which was impacted by Covid-19. In sum, the mesosystem contains “the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Within the U.S. education system are multiple stakeholders: first, students as a system will be discussed followed by administrators and leaders, teachers, and lastly, school counselors. All stakeholders are located within the microsystem which is “the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Below is a figure to further illustrate how systems theory was applied.

**Figure 1**

*Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: Covid-19 and School Counseling*

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: Covid-19 and School Counseling**



#### **Stakeholders**

Covid-19 impacted the U.S. education system as a whole. Using Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (1977), students, administrators and leaders, teachers, and school counselors can be conceptualized as subsystems located within the microsystem that are all part of the U.S. education system. Students consist of preschool (P) or kindergarten (K) through 12<sup>th</sup> grade children and adolescents who attend US public schools to obtain their education. Administrators and leaders support students through building (local), district (city-wide), state, and federal

practices, policies, and procedures. Often administrators are responsible for supporting all faculty and staff within the education system. Teachers primarily provide academic classroom instruction to K-12 students. Lastly, school counselors are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students (ASCA, 2019a). Each of these systems contribute to the overall functioning of the US education system during Covid-19.

Specifically, school counselors are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students regardless of the K-12 setting. They are unique to the school setting in that they are trained as both educators and mental health professionals. In a special issue article that explored the identity of school counselors as educators, Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2020) suggested that “the educator-counselor identity promotes school counselors’ ability to perpetually respond to changes as a result of their myriad responsibilities that serve development, prevention, social justice, and wellness” (p. 6). Furthermore, since school counselors are employed to serve students and the entire school community, authors suggested that school counselors cannot separate themselves from the educator role without considering “impossible choices” regarding responsibilities” (ASCA, 2019a; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2020, p. 5). Their unique training prepares them to be “leaders, advocates, and systems change agents in P-12 schools” (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2021a, para 3). Additionally, school counselors are trained as consultants which serve families within the school system which can consist of connecting families with resources (i.e., technology, food, finances, and shelter). They are also trained to recognize and address “characteristics, risk factors, and warning signs of students at risk for mental health and behavioral disorders” (CACREP, 2021a, para 3).

## **Covid-19**

The largest system that will be discussed, located within the exosystem, is Coronavirus (Covid-19), which is a highly contagious virus that first evolved in 2019 (WHO, 2021a). Covid-19 quickly developed into a pandemic which globally impacted societies, resulting in 191,148,056 confirmed cases and 4,109,303 deaths worldwide as of July 21, 2021 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021b). This virus first caught the U.S. by surprise with 43 confirmed cases on January 20, 2020, which rapidly increased to 195,703 confirmed cases on March 30, 2020 (WHO, 2021b). Individuals 50 years old and older are among those most susceptible to Covid-19 complications and severe illness (CDC, 2021). This deadly and highly contagious virus forced the U.S. education system to make rapid decisions to protect students, faculty, staff, families, and communities. In an article featured in Education Week (2021), authors compiled state data to provide an overview of Covid related school closures in the 2019-2020 school year. Findings indicated, “at their peak, the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools. Nearly every state either ordered or recommended that schools remain closed through the end of the 2019-20 school year” (Education Week, 2021, para. 3).

### **K-12 US Education System**

One of the largest systems impacted by Covid-19 in the U.S. was and is the K-12 education system. For the purposes of this study, the U.S. education system is located within the mesosystem. The CDC released and has continued to update an Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools Through Phased Prevention (2021). This operational strategy consists of information pertaining to health equity considerations, monitoring cases and making decisions about in-person instruction, unplanned school closures, providing options for teachers and school staff, engagement with educators, families, and the school community, prevention strategies, universal

and correct use of masks, physical distancing, handwashing and respiratory etiquette, cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities, contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, among multiple other Covid-19 and education related concerns (CDC, 2021). Similarly, multiple states have released reopening guides for K-12 schools. For example, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) (2021) released a Recover, Redesign, Restart 2020 guide for reopening schools in response to Covid-19. Although the CDC and states have released multiple suggestions for in-person K-12 instruction, some schools, or parts of schools (certain grade levels or classes), have temporarily closed in-person instruction for health and safety purposes. The CDC suggests schools who close in-person services “should make efforts to provide continuity of instruction through synchronous remote learning or at-home activities” (CDC, 2021, para. 16). Within the U.S. K-12 education system are students, administrators and leadership, teachers, and school counselors. In the following sections, each of these systems will be discussed in relation to the K-12 education system and Covid-19.

### **Students**

Among the multiple systems impacted, and arguably those most affected by K-12 school closures due to Covid-19, are students. As previously mentioned, students are part of the microsystem, which is the closest system to directly impact participants in this study. Schools have been forced to deliver their programs virtually and K-12 professionals have also been faced with the challenge of continuing to meet student needs, which are still evolving due to Covid-19. Students encountered multiple challenges related to adjusting to a virtual learning environment and school closures which for many, included hardships beyond maintaining academic standing (e.g., food insecurity, access to healthcare, and social isolation) (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Martin & Sorensen, 2020). Although some found the virtual classroom



challenging, others found it beneficial and may even choose to remain virtual, resulting in districts planning to offer virtual schooling options post Covid-19 (Li & Lalani, 2020). When conceptualizing student experiences during Covid-19, it is important to look at both the challenges and benefits of virtual learning, which will be described in greater detail next.

In spring 2020, households throughout the U.S. experienced a shift in roles when school shutdowns began. Since virtual instruction was often required due to Covid-19, many families found themselves facing new challenges. Students and families lost access to multiple in-person resources which were provided by the K-12 education system, including mental and physical health services (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Martin & Sorensen, 2020), access to food and shelter (Johnson et al., 2021), and access to teachers (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Additionally, research suggests that due to Covid-19, students have faced increased stress and anxiety (Middleton, 2020), technological inequities (Armitage & Nellums, 2020), increased risk of unreported caregiver abuse (Baron et al., 2020), academic disparities (Middleton, 2020), and social isolation (Hanover Research, 2020). Although these inequities were not further explored, authors call for the urgent need of research and conversations surrounding student inequities due to school closures in response to Covid-19.

Due to Covid-19 related school closures, primary caregivers became academic educators to their children (Bansak & Starr, 2021), families adjusted to new routines, households became full time food providers (instead of breakfast and lunch at school) (Armitage & Nellums, 2020), and families lost access to school health services (i.e., school nurse and vaccine clinics). One study used U.S. Census Bureau data from the Household Pulse Survey to examine how 200,000 U.S. households handled the shift in education during spring 2020 (i.e., when school closures began) (Bansak & Starr, 2021). The Household Pulse Survey data used was from April 23, 2021,

through May 5, 2021 (around the time of school closures due to Covid-19) and July 2, 2020, through July 7, 2020 (after the end of the K-12 school year). Some of the survey data used included self-reported information about lost employment income, food insecurity, loss of work due to Covid-19 illness, how Covid-19 affected how children “received education,” number of hours children had “live contact with teachers via internet or phone in the past week,” children’s access to technology (i.e., computer, tablet, internet, etc.) for “educational purposes,” and “household hours spent on children’s education” (Bansak & Starr, 2021; pp. 67-68).

The main findings from this study indicated households (caregivers and students) dedicated more time to education when they received higher support (access to school faculty and staff, paper options rather than strictly virtual resources) from their school systems. For example, increased number of hours children had access to a live teacher via phone or internet resulted in increased parent engagement. These findings could indicate that school counselors who offer more support to families, especially in the remote setting, are likely to increase household educational engagement.

School personnel are trained in identifying and reporting signs of potential child abuse (Baron et al., 2020). Unfortunately, since Covid-19 related school closures have taken effect, there has been an increased risk of unreported potential child abuse by school personnel. Due to school closures, school personnel have limited access to identify and report maltreatment (Baron et al., 2020). Using the Florida (FL) Department of Children and Families (DCF) public data surrounding reported potential child maltreatment cases, researchers determined an estimated 27% decline in reported cases between March 2020 (initial transition to school closures) and April 2020 (school closures). Authors suggest that these results could be generalizable to the entire US, making for an estimated 27% of alleged maltreatment cases that may have gone

unreported in April 2020 due to school closures. In terms of school counseling, these findings could indicate a need for training on how to identify and report signs of abuse virtually, as well as how to address the potential repercussions of years of undetected child abuse due to school shutdowns.

Lastly, students have experienced an increase in social isolation due to Covid-19 related school closures. This is alarming considering the multiple effects social isolation can have on K-12 students. Hanover Research (2020) suggests that K-12 students may experience the following symptoms as a result of social anxiety: anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, lack of sleep, poor perceived physical health, somatic symptoms, substance use and abuse, and suicidal tendencies. During Covid-19, school counselors should especially be aware of these potential mental health concerns related to social isolation.

Although there are multiple challenges related to school closures, students have also reported multiple benefits of the virtual learning environment due to Covid-19, to include potential decreased social anxiety (Arizona State University Prep Digital, 2019), increased educational autonomy (Torchia, 2021), and increased access to healthcare needs (Black et al., 2020). Due to these benefits among other reasons, some students may choose to remain virtual even though schools are beginning to reopen. In a forum that highlighted district leader voices regarding virtual learning, 1 in 5 schools indicated plans of offering virtual schooling post Covid-19 due to the increased demand in virtual schooling (Torchia, 2021). One of the numerous benefits of virtual schooling is flexibility in student schedules. Black et al. (2020) suggests that students who typically experience multiple absences due to healthcare related needs (i.e., illness, doctor appointments) may benefit from virtual schooling due to schedule flexibility.

Additionally, research suggests that students with healthcare needs felt “more in control of their education” when attending virtual school (Harvey et al., 2014 in Black et al., 2020, p. 119).

Although there are limited peer reviewed studies looking at the impact of virtual learning during Covid-19 on K-12 student social anxiety, multiple discussions are taking place throughout the US. For example, Arizona State University Prep Digital (2019) suggests that high school students who experience social anxiety may benefit from virtual learning. The fear of attending school and pressure of performing in the classroom is diminished through virtual learning. Students can take control of their learning environment which may decrease symptoms of social anxiety and increase their ability to focus on schoolwork.

These discussions surrounding benefits of virtual schooling and districts offering virtual school options post Covid-19 suggest a potential increased need for virtual educators, including school counselors, to address students’ academic, career, and social/emotional needs. Additionally, as Covid-19 is a rapidly evolving situation, students’ Covid-19 related needs are constantly changing. Thus, the continued uncertainty surrounding school reopening plans and potential future school closures make it imperative that school counselors are prepared and trained to meet the needs of students through multiple modalities. By understanding how Covid-19 has impacted K-12 students, school counselors will be better able to meet their needs through in-person, hybrid, and virtual school counseling programs. Additionally, knowing the experiences of school counselors meeting the needs of students during Covid-19 will help inform future school counseling practices, professional development efforts, and school counselor education programs.

## **Administrators and Leadership**

The next system discussed consists of administrators and leadership which is also located within the microsystem. Among those on the frontlines of education during and post Covid-19 are federal, state, district, and building administrators. When school closures began in the U.S., these leaders were faced with rapid decision-making processes regarding how to navigate public health while delivering a K-12 curriculum (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). They often had limited time for planning and there was a lack of procedures in place on how to proceed during the unforeseen pandemic. Administrators faced challenges related to guiding teachers, students, and parents/guardians while having to quickly respond to and plan for Covid-19. As of current, there is limited research exploring the experiences of K-12 administration and leadership during and post Covid-19 (Varela & Fedynich, 2020).

One of the few studies published explored a South Texas school district leadership team during Covid-19. 30 school leaders (principals and superintendents) completed a Likert scale online survey which consisted of 15 questions (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). The survey assessed “their experiences during school closures” which inevitably also assessed their transition to virtual learning (Varela & Fedynich, 2020, p. 4). Among the questions asked was, “The COVID-19 pandemic will change how I lead my campus/school district in the future” (p. 6). On a 5-scale rating of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” 50% of respondents indicated that they “agree” and 47% stated they “strongly agree” with this statement. This staggering majority of participants (97%) indicates that school administrators recognize the everlasting impact of Covid-19 on their leadership practices. Not only will school counselors be led under new or reformed administrative practices, but these results could also indicate that school counselors will lead and advocate differently due to Covid-19.

In a study that looked at Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) as a framework to support students during Covid-19, Borup et al. (2020) determined ways administrators collaborated with teachers to promote student success. First, as a result of school closures, administrators granted teachers “full license to try new things” which allowed them autonomy within their instruction delivery and curriculum (Borup et al., 2020, p. 166). Additionally, teachers and administrators partnered to support student engagement and behaviors through developing open communication with parents and guardians (Borup et al., 2020). They monitored student activity and alerted parents and guardians of progress (Borup et al., 2020). Although the benefits of teacher-administrator collaboration during Covid-19 were discussed, research has yet to explore how school counselors collaborate with administrators to support students during Covid-19. This information could expose current collaboration efforts along with future collaborative practices.

### **Teachers**

As previously mentioned, teachers are also a system within the microsystem that faced multiple challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite many teachers having limited to no training on how to deliver a virtual K-12 curriculum, they were forced to navigate the uncharted territory of virtual learning (Ferdig et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). In a study that explored the experiences of 334 teachers beginning virtual learning during Covid-19, “participants identified several challenges, including accessing, evaluating, learning to use, designing instruction with, and supporting student and family use of technology” (Trust & Whalen, 2021, para 1). Researchers suggest these identified challenges could inform teacher education programs along with district policy development surrounding virtual services.

In another study, Pressley (2021) that looked at teacher self-efficacy related to providing virtual services during Covid-19. 329 elementary school teachers throughout the U.S. completed the Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES). Results indicated that teachers who were providing solely virtual services reported lower instructional efficacy compared to those teaching hybrid or in-person. Researchers suggested multiple ways administrators can increase teacher self-efficacy including (a) provide observations and feedback regarding instruction, (b) encourage success by reminding teachers of prior successes, and (c) provide professional development opportunities to inform teachers of virtual instructional strategies.

In a single case-study that looked at a teacher's professional life during Covid-19, researchers suggested educators intentionally design their virtual services while being mindful of student inequities and societal needs (Kaden, 2020). This intentionality requires specialized training related to K-12 virtual learning. Another study investigated teacher's pedagogical practices within the virtual setting (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). These authors suggest that educators continue to incorporate virtual learning into the K-12 setting post Covid-19 in preparation for future events that cause schoolwide closures. By including virtual practices into the traditional school setting, both educators and students will be better prepared if learning is required to go exclusively virtual.

Overall, there exists growing research on teachers' experiences and perceptions working during Covid-19. As teachers work closely alongside school counselors, it is possible that members of these two professionals may have some similar professional experiences regarding covid-19 (e.g., is it possible that school counselors may have also lacked preparation and training to deliver a virtual comprehensive school counseling program during Covid-19?). At the same time, school counseling is a profession separate from teaching, with distinct roles, standards,

governing bodies, ethical codes, and so forth (ASCA, 2019a). Thus, just as researchers have begun investigating teachers' professional experiences during Covid-19, with there remains a need for similar research pertinent to school counselors

### **School Counselors**

As previously mentioned, at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. schools were forced to close their doors for in person learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Education Week, 2021). Thus, school counselors were faced with addressing Covid-19, in addition to political stressors, societal distress, and racial inequities throughout the K-12 education system (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2020). Additionally, due to Covid-19, school counselors were tasked with developing and maintaining relationships virtually (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Capuzzi and Stauffer (2016) suggest, "The helping relationship is the foundation on which the process of counseling and psychotherapy is based" (p. 1), making building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders critical for the school counseling process. Currently, school counselors are tasked with maintaining relationships on top of developing and implementing a comprehensive school counseling program to meet the needs of students, families, and communities during Covid-19, which inevitably is evolving given the current state of the K-12 system (i.e., planning for remaining virtual, school closures and reopening, and various uncertainties in state and federal health and education policies pertaining to Covid-19).

As previously mentioned, school counselors are part of the microsystem and provide students with academic, career, and social/emotional support, within their role as both educator and counselor; consultant/collaborator; and in crisis response. School counselors build counseling relationships with students while delivering services. Dinkmeyer (1967) suggests, "The relationship necessary for counseling children is based upon mutual trust and mutual



respect” (p. 201). Pre-pandemic, school counselors utilized multiple in-person interventions to increase access to students and foster relationships such as check-in/check-out (Crone et al., 2004 in Hawken et al., 2007), going into classrooms (Clark & Breman, 2009), requesting to see students in their offices, and students spontaneously stopping in for services. School counselors can collaborate with administrators to access families and students during a time of crisis (Borup et al., 2020). Using Borup and colleague’s (2020) suggestions regarding teacher-administrator collaboration efforts, school counselors and administrators can support student engagement and behaviors through developing a collaborative plan surrounding open communication with parents and guardians during a time of crisis. Together, they can also monitor student activity and inform parents and guardians of progress. Similarly, school counselors can collaborate and consult with teachers to identify and meet student needs (Borup et al., 2020; Limberg et al., 2020) using virtual communication (i.e., email, Zoom meetings, etc.).

### ***School Counselors and Covid-19 Response***

School counselors are both educators and mental health professionals (ACA, 2021; ASCA, n.d.). As educators, school counselors’ experiences may share some similarities to those of teachers and administrators during Covid-19. For example, school counselors may have also lacked support related to virtual curriculum development and delivery (Hamilton et al., 2020); however, their school counseling curriculum (or program) primarily focuses on social and emotional learning in addition to academic support. Often, school counselors will collaborate with other educators to address student needs. In a study previously discussed pertaining to Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) as a framework to support students during Covid-19, Borup et al. (2020) found that school counselors contacted parents and guardians to assess student needs. Teachers also electronically referred student concerns and needs to

counselors. These referrals generally surrounded “access and navigation support” pertaining to the virtual setting.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 also acted as a barrier to K-12 collaboration efforts. Limberg et al. (2021) explored the experiences of 15 school counselors and 26 teachers who participated in a professional development program about using project-based learning (PBL) to facilitate student career development. School counselors and teachers were taught how to collaborate and use PBL to deliver a career curriculum to students. Although the study was not focused on Covid-19, due to the study (i.e., 2021) taking place around the time of school shutdowns, teachers and school counselors’ experiences were impacted by Covid-19 and the adjustment to virtual learning. As a result, researchers found school counselors may be behind in their curriculum due to providing virtual services (e.g., classroom lessons) and face “barriers to collaboration” (Limberg et al., 2021, p. 6). In this study, the barriers to collaboration due to Covid-19 were mentioned; however, they were not explored.

Recently, literature has begun exploring school counseling during and post Covid-19. In a conceptual article that displayed the importance of school counselors providing services during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, Pincus et al. (2020) illustrated how school counselors were well equipped as mental health professionals to address the impacts of Covid-19 on the K-12 student population. In response to Covid-19, authors suggested school counselors can aid in crisis response, use screening tools to assess student needs, utilize suicide prevention interventions, aid in technological addiction, implement school safety interventions, and address mental health needs. At the same time, Pincus described school counselors' roles in the pandemic by Tier, such as Tier 1 focused on prevention. However, their article is purely conceptual and lacks an empirical base, and also lacks a mention of virtual school counseling services. Furthermore,

Villares et al. (2022) analyzed how school counselors provided school counseling services during the pandemic, by looking at both individual counselor and school traits. Findings indicated counselors' who spent less time with students faced higher burnout rates than those who spent more time providing direct services to students. Additionally, authors suggest school counselors would have been better prepared to provide virtual school counseling services if they had a comprehensive school counseling program in place pre Covid-19. While this study provided innovative content on school counselors' services during the pandemic, there remains a need to glean insight into the lived experiences of school counselors, specifically focused on virtual services. Finally, in a mixed methods study that looked at school counseling during Covid-19, Savitz-Romer et al. (2021) surveyed 1,060 school counselors, asking about adapting to remote schooling, factors that influenced their work, challenges faced, and support received. Reportedly, school counselors had difficulty defining their professional roles, ultimately due to a perceived lack of support and ambiguous policies that hindered their work (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Additionally, Savitz-Romer et al. (2021) found that school counselors had difficulty connecting with students virtually- specifically during school hours and pulling students from class. While this mixed methods inquiry surveyed 1,060 school counselors and interviewed 47 participants through focus groups, the qualitative data (i.e., open-ended survey responses and focus groups), and lacked (a) an in depth exploration of individual experiences, which is typically found through individual interviews, and (b) a specific focus on virtual school counseling. Hence, as researchers found school counselors were challenged to connect with students virtually, there remains a need to explore this finding in more depth. Overall, the three articles described above are the first of their kind- looking at school counselors during/post

Covid-19; however, the experiences of school counselors providing virtual school counseling services during the pandemic have yet to be explored.

Given the broad and everlasting impact Covid-19 has had on the education system and student needs, understanding the role of the school counselor as it relates to Covid-19 is essential, such as providing virtual services. Their unique position as both educator and mental health professional in the school system positions them to serve various student needs related Covid-19. Additionally, school counselors play a critical role in school reopening plans as students begin to return to in-person instruction.

### **Crisis Response**

Since school counselors are one of the only or few mental health professionals in the K-12 setting, they are often first responders to crises. The ASCA lists twelve crisis prevention and support practices in *The School Counselor and Safe Schools and Crisis Response* position statement (2019b), all of which could be applied to Covid-19 response. School counselors are also considered crisis response leaders (ASCA, 2019b) and are a crucial part of crisis response teams and policy making. Considering the Covid-19 pandemic was a crisis that impacted all K-12 schools to some capacity, school counselors played a critical role in crisis response.

Covid-19 has exposed the need for specialized training related to virtual school counseling program development and delivery (Crumb & Jones, 2021). Although most U.S. K-12 public school counselors are required to hold a master's degree in school counseling, their degree of training to perform virtual school counseling remains unclear. For instance, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) sets the standard for accredited school counselor education programs (CACREP, 2021b). Although section 5 of the CACREP standards discusses school counseling preparation, they fail to mention

training school counselors in virtual modalities specifically. Some virtual schools have historically existed, and to my knowledge, there is limited research on virtual school counseling, and few studies related to school counseling during Covid-19 (e.g., Savitz-Romer et al., 2021; Villares et al., 2021). The existing research was survey and mixed method, lacking the use of individual interviews to capture a robust description of school counselors' experiences during the pandemic. Further, the existing literature has not examined the constructs of virtual school counseling specifically. Thus, a phenomenological investigation of school counselors providing virtual school counseling services during Covid-19 has yet to be conducted; such a study would add novel research to the school counseling field.

In sum, understanding the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 may inform school counseling practices during future crises, aid with school reopening plans, and offer insight into providing students with virtual school counseling in the future. These experiences can inform school counselor education programs along with professional development efforts regarding meeting the needs of K-12 students during and after school closures and related crises. Lastly, understanding the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 will also aid in preparing school counselors for careers in virtual school counseling. These positions appear to be in demand more than ever due to schools offering permanent virtual options as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Li & Lalani, 2020).

### **The Lasting Effects of Covid-19 on the U.S. Education System**

The evolving and high-stakes nature of the Covid-19 crisis will likely have both short and long-lasting impacts on K-12 U.S. education. In the short-term, research suggests that schools must reopen with safety plans in place (Johnson et al., 2021). Multiple studies have been conducted to discuss reopening school plans during and post Covid-19 to include policies on

social distancing (Pattison et al., 2021), the use of masks (Espana et al., 2020), testing for Covid-19 and contact tracing (Johnson et al., 2021), and the use of task forces to make decisions (Dibner et al., 2020).

For instance, findings from Espana and colleagues (2020) indicated the effectiveness of facemasks and reopening at lower occupancy rates in an effort to lower infection rates. In another study, researchers partnered with the American School Health Association (ASHA) to explore school staff needs related to schools reopening post Covid-19 (Pattison et al., 2021). This study consisted of 375 ASHA member survey respondents from 45 states throughout the US. Respondents' top concerns regarding returning to in-person instruction included the following: *feasibility of social distancing (93.6%), resurgence of COVID-19 (92.8%), and the availability of health supplies (88.8%)* (Pattison et al., 2021, para 1). Pattison et al. (2021) suggest educators consider reopening plans from a holistic perspective including *Whole School, Whole Community, and Whole Child* models to meet student and community needs (para 1). Additionally, Dibner et al. (2020) suggests schools develop a task force to address reopening plans. Task forces can consist of families, local health officials, school staff, and other community members.

In addition to short-term, immediate educational implications, scholars have also suggested that Covid-19 may also have long-last lasting implications as well. Due to the benefits of the virtual school setting, including reducing impacts of social anxiety (Arizona State University Prep Digital, 2019), increased student autonomy over their education (Torchia, 2021), and increased student access to healthcare needs (Black et al., 2020), districts are opting to offer permanent virtual school options (Li & Lalani, 2020). With an increase in virtual K-12 schools, it is reasonable to infer that virtual school counseling is now an established position within the K-12 system, and there will be an increase in virtual school counseling positions and the likelihood

that virtual school counseling will continue to exist into the future. Thus, it is imperative that virtual school counseling is examined and understood.

### **The Current Study**

Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, several factors or systems impact K-12 education: students, building administrators, teachers, school counselors, and incidences like crises. Beginning in approximately March 2020, the U.S. has been undergoing a societal level crisis: the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, schools throughout the U.S. transitioned to online learning. Research on staff members' professional experiences navigating the Covid-19 pandemic is in infancy and has been primarily focused on administrators and teachers. The three known publications pertaining to school counselors during Covid-19 were not phenomenological investigations- thus, there lacks a thick, rich account of school counselors' experiences during the pandemic. As such, one voice that has been limited in the research is that of school counselors. Since school counselors are the only professionals in the K-12 education system responsible for providing a comprehensive program to meet the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students, along with the only professionals trained as both educators and mental health counselors (ACA, 2021; ASCA, n.d.), exploring their role within the education system during Covid-19 is essential, particularly pertaining to their experiences with virtual school counseling services.

Additionally, the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students have evolved due to Covid-19, causing a shift in how school counseling programs must be delivered to meet student needs, as schools throughout the U.S. closed and services were provided virtually. For these reasons, it is imperative that the experiences of school counselors' during Covid-19 be explored. Inevitably, the effects of Covid-19 will impact the future of the U.S. K-12 education

system, forcing school counselor programs to reimagine the delivery of academic, career, and social/emotional services to some capacity (in both virtual and in-person settings), while also preparing for future crises and school closures. As such, the research focus was to explore the experiences of school counselors who provided virtual K-12 school counseling services during the Covid-19 pandemic.



### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Table 1 provides a brief overview of the research methodology. As previously mentioned, this is a phenomenological study which focused on the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19, particular to providing virtual school counseling services. This section will discuss the purpose and research focus, researcher reflexivity, rationale, study design and protocol, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness strategies, limitations, and future research.

**Table 1**

#### *Methodology*

<b>Purpose and Research Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To explore the professional experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 providing virtual services to K-12 students.</li> </ul>
<b>Researcher Reflexivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Philosophical Assumptions:</b> Aligned with Moustakas' (1994) framework of phenomenological research, I recognized that my values, beliefs, and ideals directly impact my research and understanding of participant experiences.</li> <li>● <b>Researcher Paradigm:</b> Using a constructivist paradigm lens, participants are viewed as constructing their own realities based on experiences and knowledge is created through dialogue (Guba &amp; Lincoln, 1994).</li> </ul>
<b>Rationale for Methodology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Qualitative Phenomenological Investigation:</b> Phenomenology is a qualitative method that aims to explore and reveal lived experiences (Husserl, 1969 as cited in Fouche, 1993; Moustakas, 1994).</li> </ul>
<b>Study Design and Protocol</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Participants and Recruitment:</b> Participants consisted of 10 U.S. public school counselors who provided virtual for at least one academic year since 2019.</li> <li>● <b>Demographics:</b> participant name, email address, gender, age, race, total years of experience, school name, (district name, and grade level during the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 school years</li> <li>● <b>Confidentiality and Safety:</b> Zoom interviews were password protected and participants entered into a waiting room. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identity and all data was stored in a dual</li> </ul>

	password protected electronic folder.
<b>Data Collection Methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 2 types of data collected: semi-structured interviews and participant demographics (previously mentioned)</li> <li>● <b>Interviews:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Semi-structured 1-hour interviews were conducted once with each participant (see Appendix D for interview protocol, 9 questions).</li> <li>○ Conducted via Zoom; audio and video recorded.</li> <li>○ Transcribed via Zoom and I reviewed/edited for accuracy.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Data Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● After conducting and transcribing interviews, I used Moustakas (1994) modified version of Kaam's (1959, 1966) data analysis framework to conceptualize participants' lived experiences.</li> </ul>
<b>Trustworthiness Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Credibility:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Member checking was used to ensure participant experiences were accurately portrayed.</li> <li>○ Reflexivity was used to account for the researcher's biases, thoughts, and experiences.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● <b>Transferability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Thick descriptions were used throughout this study to describe the research process and results.</li> <li>○ An audit trail illustrated the research process through journaling (i.e., meeting notes, thoughts, experiences, and timeline).</li> </ul> </li> <li>● <b>Dependability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Triangulation included multiple researchers and data from multiple participants.</li> <li>○ Audit trail as mentioned above.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● <b>Confirmability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ An external auditor was used to view a sample of three coded transcripts (transcripts 1, 5, and 8), memos, audit trail, and the results section.</li> <li>○ Reflexivity statement, journaling, and memoing took place.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Limitations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Could be strengthened by using multiple types of data, to bolster trustworthiness by and seeing patterns across multiple types of data (e.g., focus group interview, observations, participant journal, etc.).</li> <li>● The addition of focus groups could capture conversations and interactions between participants (Hays &amp; Singh, 2012).</li> </ul>

<b>Future Research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Geographical location could be narrowed down by state, region, district, or school to gather a more in-depth understanding of how local and state policies impacted experiences.</li> <li>● Virtual services provided to specific student populations (i.e., LGBTQ+, students receiving special education or gifted services, grade level, etc.).</li> </ul>
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### **Purpose and Research Focus**

The purpose and research focus of this study is to explore the professional experiences of school counselors during Covid-19, especially related to providing virtual school counseling services. Due to the lack of existing literature and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on K-12 education and the school counseling profession, the researchers aimed to explore the experiences of school counselors who provided virtual K-12 school counseling services during Covid-19.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

I am a third-year doctoral candidate at Old Dominion University (ODU) studying Counselor Education and Supervision with a projected graduation date of May 2022. I earned my master's degree in Education with a concentration in School Counseling from ODU in Norfolk, VA. I am school counseling license eligible. It is important to note my professional role during March 2020, which was during the initial transition period from in person to the virtual setting of the K-12 public school system due to Covid-19. I was teaching an undergraduate level course at ODU during this time. I was required to change my teaching modality from in-person to virtual in March 2020. I received support from the university and my department as I transitioned our classroom instruction from in-person to online. It is also important to note that I identify as an educator and may have shared experiences with participants from this regard (i.e., perception of institutional support, state policies surrounding education, struggles students faced, etc.).

Aside from identifying as a school counselor, PhD student, and educator, I am also a

White cisgender female. I support equitable access to resources for all K-12 students and feel as though the U.S. public school system fails to provide equitable resources and services to all students, especially based on school counselors' high caseloads and being tasked with duties and expectations unrelated to their role as mental health professionals. I also believe that school counselors should have smaller caseloads (250:1) per the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) guidelines (n.d.) and feel pre-pandemic, their role to meet the needs of all students was challenging due to limited time and resources. Since health concerns, policies, and regulations quickly evolved into political debates throughout the U.S. in 2020, it is important to conclude with my views on the Covid-19 pandemic. I found that safety and health were paramount for all citizens and that social distancing, wearing masks, and sanitizing often were essential to limit the spread of Covid-19 and to save lives.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Within Moustakas' (1994) framework, the researcher is encouraged to embrace how their own "knowledge and experience" influences the phenomenological process (p. 26). Aligned with Moustakas' (1994) framework of phenomenological research, I recognize that my values, beliefs, and ideals directly impact my research and understanding of participant experiences. The following components of philosophical assumptions will be described below: (a) ontology, (b) epistemology, (c) axiology, (d) rhetoric, and (e) methodology.

In regards to ontology, the researcher assumes there are multiple realities unique to individual experiences. Individuals exist within dominant and oppressed systems that shape one's reality. Epistemology refers to the process and limitations of knowledge (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). Researchers adopted the assumption that knowledge is constantly being expanded through interactions and experiences. Axiology describes how researchers' values,

biases, and assumptions impact their research (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). As previously described in the reflexivity statement, researchers identify as educators and school counseling professionals. Rhetoric is related to how the data is presented (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). In this study, results were reported using participant voices in first person. Lastly, inductive phenomenology was the method used to explore participant experiences.

### **Researcher Paradigm**

Using a constructivist paradigm lens, participants are viewed as constructing their own realities based on experiences and knowledge is created through dialogue (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The individual interview process allowed me to co-create knowledge with participants using semi-structured questions. Specifically, the researcher used semi-structured interview questions and flexible probing questions, so each interview could be shaped to the participants' unique lived experience, across a universal interview protocol. Bracketing the researcher's experiences and biases also helped bolster the study's focus on the participant, limiting researcher bias.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

Qualitative research calls for the exploration and understanding of participant perceptions. Phenomenology is a qualitative method that aims to explore and reveal lived experiences (Husserl, 1969 as cited in Fouche, 1993). Hays and Singh (2012) describe the objective of phenomenological research as capturing the "essence of direct experience" (p. 58). Moustakas (1994) suggests the researcher is embedded throughout the phenomenological process as they collect information about participant experiences. Since this study aims to explore experiences, phenomenology was chosen as the qualitative research method. To best capture

participants' lived experiences, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted via Zoom, a live and interactive video platform.

### **Qualitative Phenomenological Investigation**

Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological framework is largely based on the work of Hegel, Kant, Descartes, Heidegger, and Husserl. Moustakas (1994) describes *phenomena* as “the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (p. 26). The transcendental phenomenological process considers *learning* as the *product* of blending reality with perception (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). In other words, by blending reality and perception, one can ultimately formulate meaning. Through the act of being *intentional*, the researcher is aware of how their presence within the research process impacts overall meaning.

### **Study Design and Protocol**

The school counseling field consists of multiple professionals such as practicing school counselors, district coordinators, and counselor educators. Since this study focused directly on practicing school counselors providing virtual services to K-12 students, participants consisted of school counselors who:(a) have been/were employed as a school counselor by a U.S. public school for at least one academic year since fall 2019 and (b) have provided virtual school counseling services [e.g., email, video, phone, etc. w/ students, families, staff, etc.] at some point throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The following section will discuss participants and recruitment including demographics and confidentiality and safety.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

Literature suggests a phenomenon is best explored through the experiences of 10-12 participants (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). The present study consisted of 10 U.S. public school counselors across 4 states. Since the focus was to explore the lived experiences of

school counselors providing virtual services throughout Covid-19, participants must have met the following inclusion criteria: (a) have been/were employed as a school counselor by a U.S. public school for at least one academic year since 2019 and (b) have provided virtual school counseling services [e.g., email, video, phone, etc. w/ students, families, staff, etc.] at some point throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, participants must have been willing to share their candid experiences with the researcher. To note, the initial inclusion criteria required school counselors to have been practicing for three consecutive years since 2019 and be employed in VA. Due to lack of participation, the inclusion criteria was expanded as stated above.

Recruitment took place throughout the U.S. for multiple reasons. First, U.S. public school counselors are required to follow federal, state, and district policies. Additionally, a large majority of U.S. school counselors are required to have specialized school counseling training at the master's level. To control for changes in school counselor qualifications, private schools were eliminated from this study. Additionally, participants must have been employed for at least one school year during the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e., 2019/2020 academic school year forward). This allowed me to explore a well-rounded experience related to different milestones throughout the school year (i.e., students returning to school after summer break, scheduling periods, state testing [typically in the spring], closing of academic year, etc.) and phases of the pandemic over the last two years.

Participants were recruited through some purpose and snowball sampling. First, I invited professional school counseling organizations (state and national level) to share the recruitment materials via email and social media. I also posted recruitment information to social media platforms and emailed school counseling professionals (i.e., practicing school counselors, counselor educators, district coordinators, ODU alumni, etc.) throughout our networks. Snowball

sampling was used to gain information on other potential participants. Our networks were asked to pass the recruitment information along to potential participants and after each interview, participants were invited to share the study recruitment materials with any other school counselors who may be interested in participating.

Specifically, recruitment materials included a Google Form link and a variation of a catchy phrase (i.e., U.S. Public School Counselors!!! Help us learn about your experience providing virtual services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Follow the link below). The Google Form contained information from a sample recruitment email (Appendix A), including a brief overview of the study, researcher contact information, and the IRB number. The form also asked participants for the following information: (a) to identify if they met the inclusion criteria, (b) name (first, last), (c) email address, (d) phone number, and (e) 3 options for their 1-hour Zoom interview (date/time).

After participants completed the Google Form indicating they met the participation criteria and their availability for an interview, I reached out via email to confirm an interview time/date. Upon scheduling the interview, I sent an email with a Google Form (Appendix B) containing the informed consent and demographic questionnaire along with a Zoom invitation. All participants completed the Google Form prior to our interview.

### ***Demographics***

Participants were asked to review the informed consent (Appendix B) and consent to participate in the study via Google Forms prior to completing the demographic questionnaire. The following demographic data was collected via Google Forms (Appendix B): (a) participant name, (b) email address, (c) gender, (d) age, (e) race, (f) total years of experience, (g) school name, (h) district name, and (i) grade level during the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022

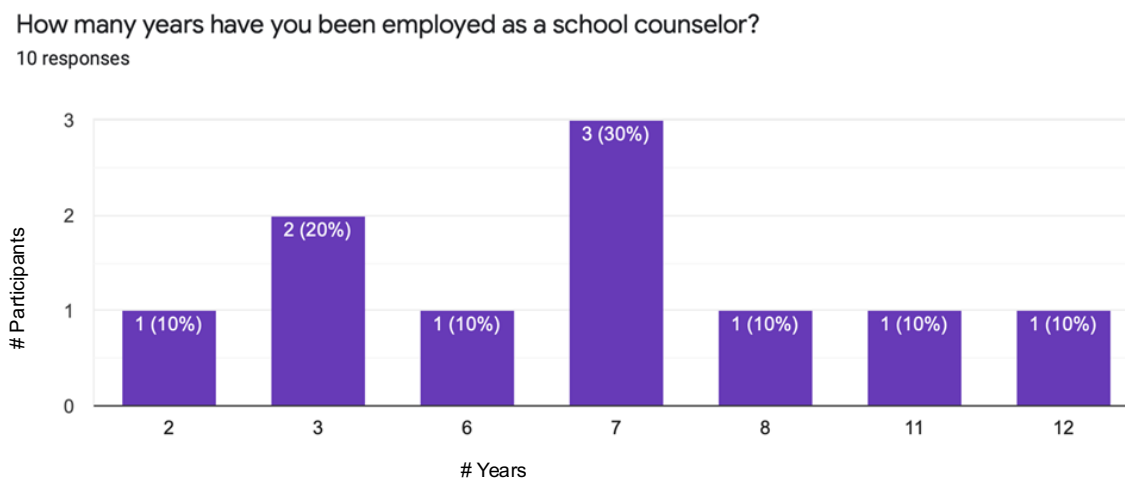


school years, to compare any similarities or differences in participant experiences. After participants completed the Google Form, their information was auto generated into a Google Sheet.

Figures 2-8 illustrate participant demographics: (a) years employed as a school counselor, (b) grade level during the 2019-2020 school year, (c) grade level during the 2020-2021 school year, (d) grade level during the 2021-2022 school year, (e) gender identity, (f) age, and (g) racial identity.

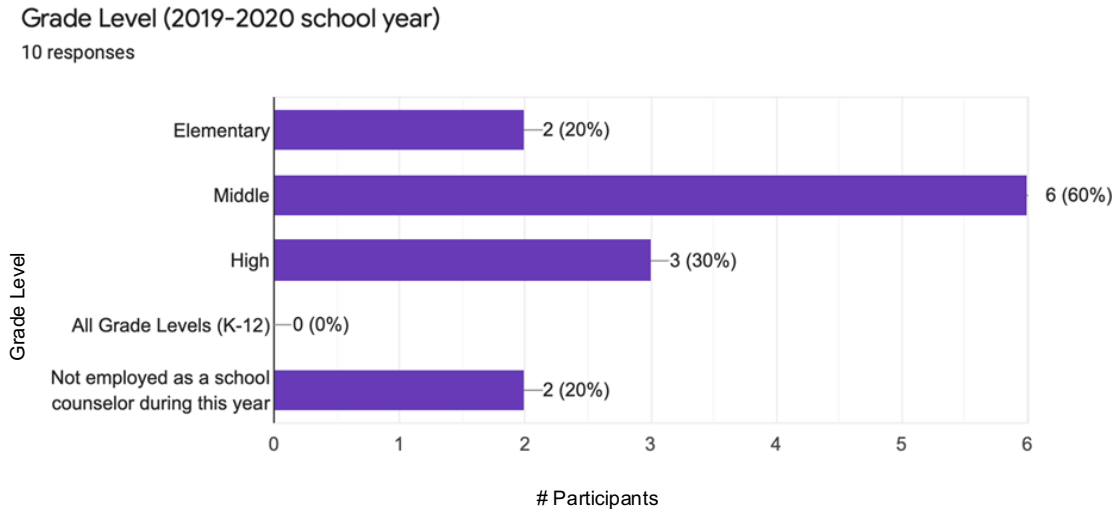
## Figure 2

### *Years Employed as a School Counselor*



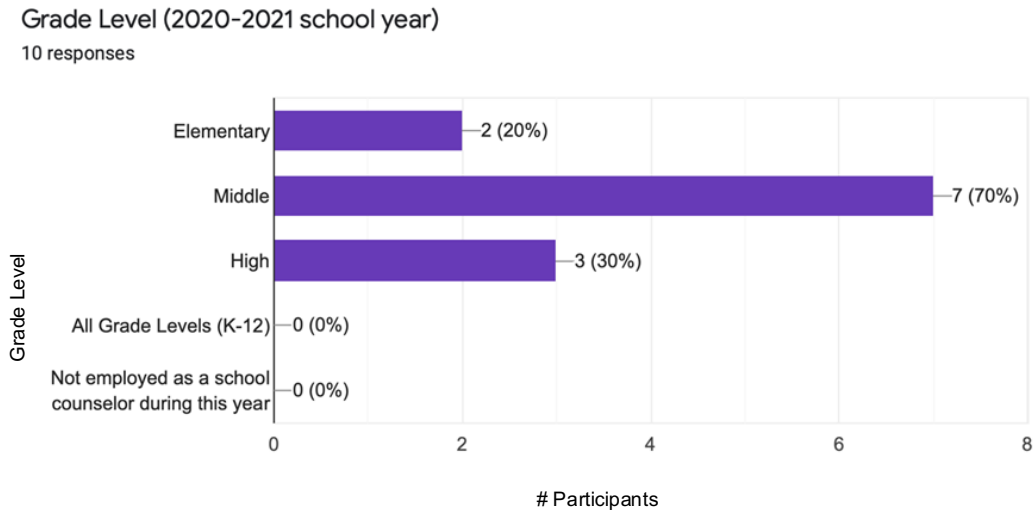
**Figure 3**

*Grade Level During the 2019-2020 School Year*



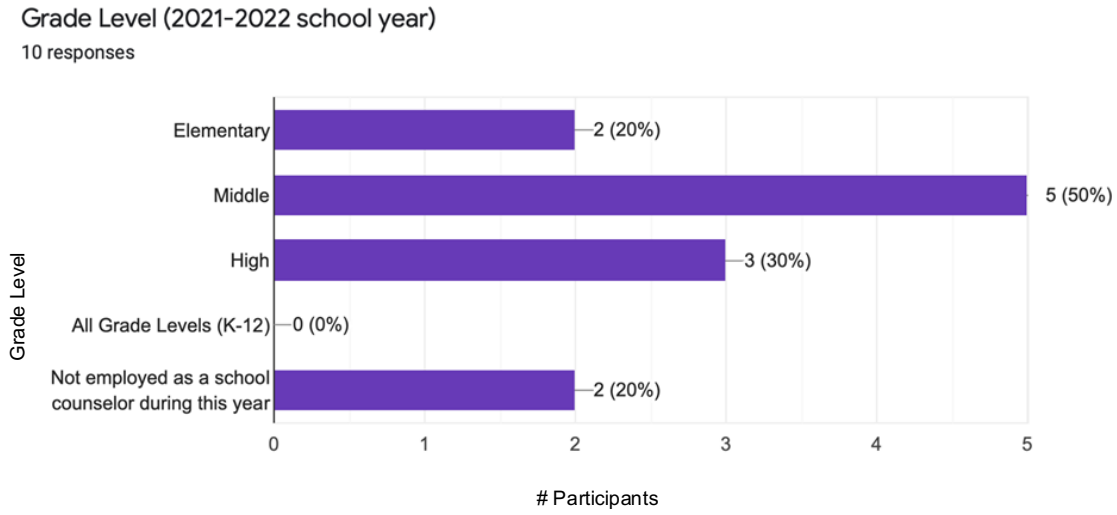
**Figure 4**

*Grade Level During the 2020-2021 School Year*



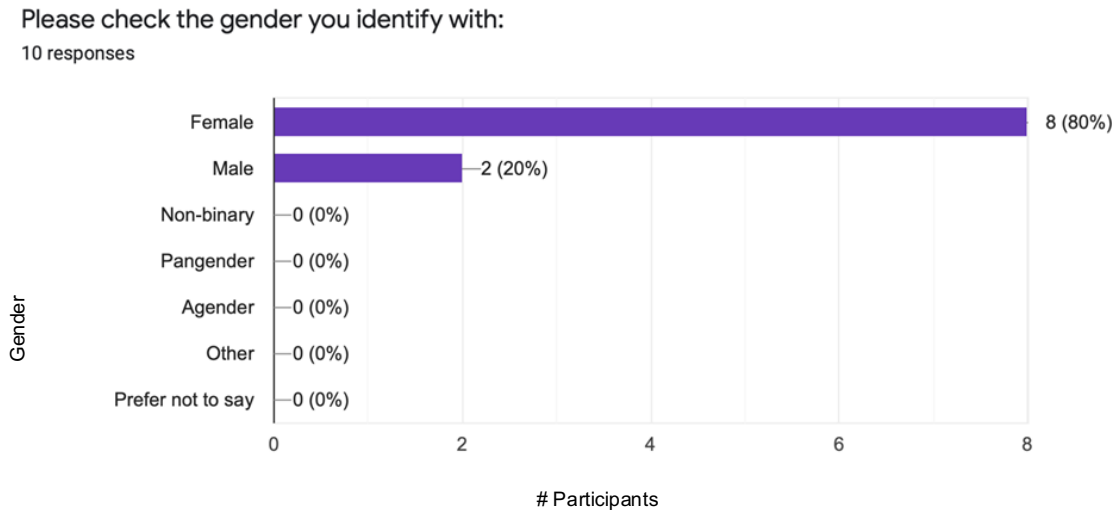
**Figure 5**

*Grade Level During the 2021-2022 School Year*



**Figure 6**

*Gender Identity*

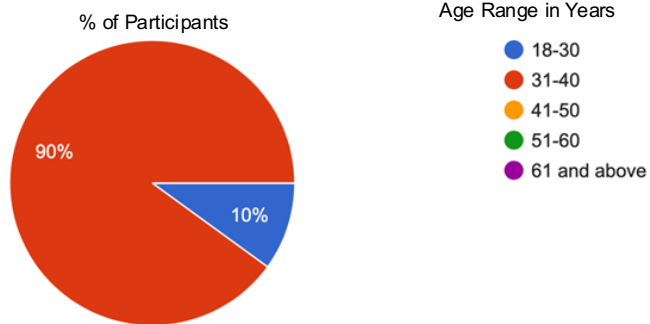


**Figure 7**

*Age*

Please select your age range:

10 responses

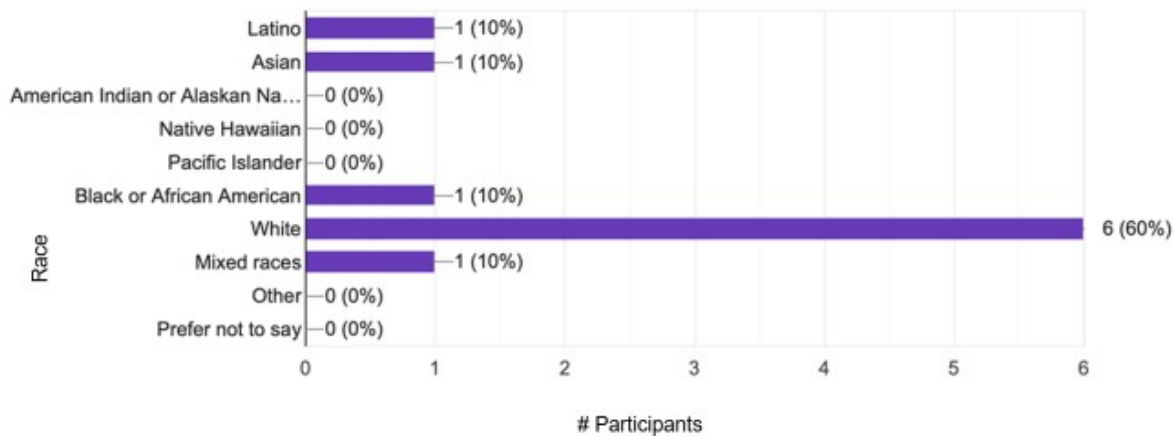


**Figure 8**

*Racial Identity*

Please check the race you identify with (check all that apply):

10 responses



## **Confidentiality and Safety**

To capture the most authentic participant responses and to protect participant identity, all participant names, schools, and districts were assigned pseudonyms. It was important that participating school counselors felt open to sharing with limited fear of repercussions from their administrators. To increase participant confidentiality and safety via Zoom, we developed a Zoom link unique to each interview. The Zoom links were password protected and included a waiting room. Each participant was asked to use their full name when joining the meeting so I could accurately identify who was in the waiting room prior to admitting them to the interview. All interview data (i.e., transcripts and recordings) were saved on a dual authentication Google folder which only the researchers had access to.

## **Data Collection Methods**

The two forms of data collected were (a) participant demographic information and (b) semi-structured interviews. As previously mentioned, participant demographics were collected via Google Forms prior to each interview.

## **Interviews**

Using semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is not bound to the interview protocol; they are able to ask questions out of sequence, change questions, and omit questions (Hays & Singh, 2012). This style of interview allows the interviewer to discover information beyond the original protocol and to truly garner participants' lived experience- in which the participants' responses can impact the follow-up probing questions. Additionally, the interviewer can also ask follow-up questions to generate richer content (Roulston, 2013). With open questions, the participant can formulate elaborate answers to questions related to a specific topic.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participant experiences during

Covid-19, particular to virtual school counseling. Interviews were facilitated via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform (Zoom, 2021) and each participant completed one 1-hour individual interview. All interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed via Zoom. After each interview, I reviewed the audio and video recordings while simultaneously reviewing and editing the transcriptions for accuracy. The recordings and transcripts were then saved via Google Drive for further analysis.

Interview questions allow the interviewer to guide the direction of conversations while gathering participant experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). Since the study is about experiences, I asked open-ended questions to encourage elaborate and detailed responses from participants. Interview questions are often “the sub-questions in the research study, phrased in a way that interviewees can understand” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164).

An interview protocol and two overarching interview questions (Appendix D) was developed with the research focus in mind. The interview protocol was read to participants at the start of our interview, for consistency across participants. The semi-structured questions were formulated around research pertaining to the K-12 setting during Covid-19 and the role of the school counselor. Aligned with recommendations for phenomenological investigations (Moustakas, 1994), I asked two semi-structured interview questions pertaining to their experiences; further, the interview protocol listed possible open-ended sub-questions or probing questions that may be used based on participant responses to the primary two interview questions. Specifically, following Moustakas’ (1994) interview framework, I asked (a) What have you experienced in terms of providing virtual school counseling services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic? and (b) What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience while providing virtual school counseling services throughout the Covid-19

pandemic? Additionally, I asked if participants had any artifacts (i.e., lesson plans, training materials, etc.) they would like to share to further illustrate their experience providing virtual school counseling services. Please see Appendix D for a list of the probing questions, following the two overarching interview questions.

### **Interview Setting**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, an interactive web-based video platform (Zoom, 2021). Zoom allowed me greater access to participants since no travel time or financial resources (i.e., transportation, housing, time off, etc.) were required. To best capture participant experiences, each Zoom interview was video, and audio recorded, and the Zoom transcript feature was used to transcribe interviews. Participants were sent a Zoom link and instructions on how to operate Zoom prior to our interview date. Participants were asked to voice any concerns or questions about using Zoom prior to our scheduled meeting time. A reminder email was sent the day of each interview with the Zoom link.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making meaning out of collected information. After conducting and transcribing interviews, I used Moustakas (1994) modified version of Kaam's (1959, 1966) data analysis framework to conceptualize participants' lived experiences. Moustakas (1994) suggests using the entire interview transcript throughout the data analysis process. The following steps were taken: 1. listing and preliminary grouping, 2. reduction and elimination, 3. clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, 4. final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: validation, 5. using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher an *individual textual description* of the experience. 6. construct for each co-researcher an *individual structural*

*description* of the experience based on the individual textural description and imaginative variation, and 7. construct *for each research participant a textural-Structural description* of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121).

Beginning with step 1, two researchers read through the transcripts and noted their thoughts and reactions, which were discussed during a follow up meeting. During this meeting, both researchers discussed their reactions and reflections. Then, the first researcher read through the transcripts again, highlighting and assigning codes to meaningful content. The second author then reviewed the coded transcripts and noted areas of agreement and disagreement. The two researchers met again to discuss the transcripts and ultimately came to a consensus on all coded transcripts. During step 2, the first researcher exported all codes and corresponding transcript quotes into a Google sheet, developing a code book. Then, both researchers independently reviewed the code book, making note of quotes that fit better under certain themes and themes that could be collapsed or blended. The researchers met again to discuss quotes and themes, and as consensus was made, moved quotes throughout the code book and combined or eliminated certain themes. During step 3, the researchers met and used the code book to develop rich descriptions of the themes. Lastly, during this meeting the researchers discussed the overall experiences of participants and the significance of their shared experiences. .

### **Trustworthiness Strategies**

Given the nature of a phenomenological study, the researcher is a primary tool in determining the research focus and exploring participant experiences (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). While considering the integral role of the researcher, it is relatively inevitable that bias, world view, and values influence the results to some extent (Hays & Singh,



2012). For this reason, multiple trustworthiness strategies were used to minimize researcher impact and convey participants' experiences in their purest form. Using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness, the following are outlined below: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to how well researchers portrayed participant perceptions (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was used to ensure participant experiences were accurately reported. Interview transcripts were emailed to participants for review, and participants were asked to respond within one week with any changes, clarifying remarks, and/or additional information. All transcripts were approved by participants without modifications. Researchers engaged in peer debriefing sessions via Zoom numerous times throughout the study. The coding team consisted of three researchers. The team met numerous times to discuss and collapse themes. Lastly, an external auditor was used to ensure accuracy in relaying participant experiences.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to describing the study process in a robust manner. Goodman-Scott and Cholewa (in press) stress the importance of illustrating participant experiences in-depth so that the reader can draw conclusions between the study results and their own experience. Thick descriptions were used throughout this study to describe the research process. The team created an audit trail to illustrate the research process through journaling (i.e., meeting notes, thoughts, experiences, and timeline).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to how clearly researchers illustrate the steps taken throughout a

study (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail mentioned above is one way we ensured dependability. We also engaged in triangulation by using multiple researchers and data sources to support our findings (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in pres). The research team consisted of three individuals along with an external auditor. Two of the researchers read through transcripts and identified themes and preliminary codes. All three researchers met to discuss potential themes, the coded transcripts, code book, and quotes to report in the results section. Data were collected through interviews and demographic questionnaires.

### **Confirmability**

Data were reported using direct interview quotes as examples to display the relation to main concepts and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012 in Elo et al., 2014). The following documents were sent to an external auditor for review: (a) three coded transcripts, (b) final coding document containing themes/subthemes, (c) final code book, (d) coding journal, (e) working code book, (f) working coding document containing themes/subthemes, (g) and participant data. The auditor confirmed that the final codes accurately represented participant experiences. The auditor also noted seeing how themes evolved throughout the coding process, researcher reflexivity, and expressed that the coding process was, “organized, methodical and credible.” In conclusion, no recommendations were made by the auditor. The process of *epoche* or bracketing is used where the researcher reveals their views to capture the purest version of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A reflexivity statement, reflexive journaling, and memoing were used throughout the study to bracket researcher views, values, and experiences.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity, which is part of credibility, dependability, and confirmability, is used to

account for the researcher's biases, thoughts, and experiences. I included a reflexivity statement to inform the reader of my identity and engaged in reflexive journaling and memoing throughout the research process to minimize researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After each interview, I memoed my initial thoughts and engaged in reflexive journaling to process my interview experience. After each coding session and meeting, I memoed my thoughts and feelings pertaining to the transcripts and codes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This phenomenological investigation explored school counselors' experiences providing virtual services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants shared their first-hand experiences related to the relatively new world of virtual school counseling. The current study resulted in three themes, (a) lack of access to students, (b) forced adjustment, and (c) the challenge of addressing mental health complexities.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Access to Students: Feelings of Frustration and Loss**

Counselors described how their experience providing virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic was impacted by having limited access to students in the virtual setting. Many expressed that providing counseling services to a blank computer screen hindered the counseling relationship. According to the counselors, students would often keep their camera off and not respond to various methods of communication (i.e., emails, phones, messages, etc.). Despite counselors' attempts to connect with and access students virtually, often they felt their efforts were unsuccessful resulting in school counselors' frustration. Participants also explained the negative impact of not being able to physically visit a classroom to see a student, call a student down to their office, or check-in with students in the halls. They seemed to be grieving the loss of daily interactions with students. Some went on to express concern for students' mental/physical health and safety at home; since they could not physically see students, they were unsure if their needs were being met. The first theme, *lack of access to students: feelings of frustration and loss*, resulted in three subthemes, (a) hindering relationships: blank screens and students not responding, (b) grieving spontaneous interactions, (c) having concern for students' well-being.

### ***Hindering Relationships: Blank Screens and Students Not Responding***

Participants shared that relationships with their students and students' families were negatively impacted by their lack of access, including providing services to blank computer screens and navigating new strategies for coordinating communication with students and families. One participant shared their challenge related to students keeping their cameras off,

It was really difficult to get them to turn their cameras on. So I had to learn a few tricks to get them to turn their cameras on. It was hard to know if I was just teaching to a blank screen or if they were actually children on the other end (P4).

Another participant stated,

But I think that a lot of students became disengaged because, even if you would meet with them, they wouldn't turn their screen on. It's like you were talking to this land out there, you don't know who's behind the screen. Some students, you couldn't see that, [and] that really made the job really hard (P5).

As a result of students not responding to communication efforts, one participant shared strategies for consulting with other school stakeholders,

And then... we share that [best method to contact student] around with all the other staff... They'll say, "Hey, have you ever been able to get Jessica to answer you in class?" And none of the teachers will say, or all the teachers will say, "No, I've never been able to get her to respond." And one teacher would be like, "Hey I called her one time, and she answered the phone." And they'd be like, "Oh, give me her number, I need to have her number, because I need to talk to her about this test" (P1).

Similarly, a participant explained their frustration accessing students virtually, and the communication gaps,

Lots of access issues. How do you get in contact with [students] after that 'cause a lot of them are not checking their email and they think email is like text messaging. If I could tell you the amount of emails I've gotten where the whole body of the email is in the subject (P2).

### ***Grieving Spontaneous Interactions***

In regards to providing virtual services, school counselors also described the lack of spontaneous interactions with students, such as check-ins in the hallways and having students unexpectedly stop into their offices. Many expressed feeling sadness and ultimately grieving the loss of these interactions. When describing missing students popping into their office, one school counselor expressed,

The kids weren't coming to you... Being in-person, God, I love it so much. You have kids just pop into your office. Virtually, we did not even have any sort of access to... [online school platform] add kids to our caseload. None of that was provided for us [during the pandemic]. It wasn't necessarily easy or simple for kids to come see us when they needed to (P2).

Another participant explained how he preferred to stop into classrooms, but no longer could due to the virtual setting. He stated,

I'm much more of an in-person social person... It was different... Even when I'm in school, I don't wanna call up to a room and say, "Hey, can you send a student down?". I'd rather...walk up a quick flight of steps, grab a student, see some people in the hallways... I don't like the disconnect that comes with the phone (P7).

One school counselor shared that the lack of spontaneous interactions felt unreal. She said,

A lot of it didn't feel real. I didn't have a kid in front of me crying- seeing cuts on their

arm... I didn't have to get into an argument in person with a parent - because it was all through a computer or if it was texting, it didn't feel as real. So I didn't carry it home the same way that I usually would (P1).

Another participant described how the lack of physically seeing students on a daily basis resulted in less recognition of signs of potential abuse. The school counselor stated,

On the flip side of that, the limited access that I had to students early on, that's something we're still recovering from... When kids initially came back last school year, I did more CPS reports than I'd ever done in my entire career... I'm sure there are different theories on why that might be... We didn't have access [to students] for so long (P4).

### ***Having Concern for Students' Well-Being***

Due to school counselors' lack of access to students, they worried for students' well-being. For instance, multiple participants described going to students' homes to check on them. One school counselor stated, "and sometimes I'd have to do home visits, because then I'd have to go and be like, 'Hey you haven't logged in in two weeks. You okay in there? Is your mom home? Can we talk?'" (P1). Similarly, another described their concern for students' safety,

I wasn't going to be aware of their safety issues. Are they getting taken care of?... What their home life is like?... We help them focus on school while they're here... How are they going to compartmentalize when they're at home? Because they're having all of that at one time. I know how I was feeling at home, I can only imagine how some of these kids were feeling (P3).

Another participant expressed panic and worry regarding student well-being by saying, "I was a little panicked [about not seeing students in person] because... Once again, you're... worried when you can't see kids, when you don't know where they are... or what they're doing" (P4).

Similarly, a participant described how they felt “awful” about not seeing students,

Awful - we want to connect with kids and we want to lay eyes on them and make sure that they're okay... You can tell so much by interacting with a kid and talking to them. And... we didn't have that... It was hard because it's like, “Where is this kid? Are they Okay?”... I've let their parent know, and so I know that I've done my due diligence, but [in] my counselor heart, is this kid really okay? (P9).

## **Theme 2: Forced Adjustment**

All participants described an adjustment period while providing virtual school counseling services. Some expressed feeling like their efforts were worthless or reactive, resulting in merely attempting to keep up with stakeholder immediate needs. Many explained their struggle with knowing how to navigate ethical practices, such as contacting students virtually, handling crisis, and confidentiality. Lastly, participants spoke about the adjustment to technology. This second theme, *forced adjustment*, resulted in three subthemes, (a) facilitating reactive practices and feelings of failure, (b) maneuvering ethical concerns, (c) navigating new technology.

### ***Facilitating Reactive Practices and Feelings Of Failure***

As the Covid-19 pandemic forced school counselors to provide virtual services, participants described providing services reactively. Despite attempting to keep up with stakeholder needs, their efforts often resulted in feelings of failure. When asked about their experiences providing virtual school counseling services, one participant expressed, “constantly makes it feel like you're just spinning your wheels and not getting anywhere and not making a difference and not doing any good” (P1). Similarly, another participant stated, “I felt pretty worthless... It was just more running around... I felt like I just wasn't doing anything.” (P8).



Participants also described how their preparation and training for providing virtual school counseling services impacted their experience,

Nobody gave us classes on how to do that [virtual school counseling] and what are the best techniques... A lot of it was just learning as we go... The teachers were the ones that were focused on getting online and doing it quickly, so teachers were the forefront. I completely understand that, but counseling and other... resource classes... they were pushed to the back burner, like, "We'll do you guys later, but we gotta get our teachers set first,"... And there was training on different online and virtual techniques, but it was almost like it was thrown at you so quickly you couldn't even process it all... and figure out... You would sit through this training, but you didn't have time then to figure out how to incorporate what you had just learned into doing it because you were expected to do it last week... It was a challenging time (P4).

Another participant described how their daily tasks became challenging while providing virtual school counseling services,

I still have grades to do. You're getting with a hundred teachers who aren't in school [chuckle]... They don't submit their grades on time when we're here, your typical responsibilities didn't go away, they just became much harder to manage. Enrollments, that was weird. Just your daily tasks. Getting records... when they're like, "Well, I don't know what to do, this student's trying to enroll, the school's not in session where they're coming from, the parents are military, they don't have their stuff yet." It was crisis management pretty much (P3).

A different participant described how it felt like her efforts were not enough,

I would always ask my director, “What do I need to do?... I feel like I'm not doing enough or I still don't know what I'm doing.” She would tell me, “This is new for all of us. We're all on the same page. We're all still trying to figure it out.” Which was comforting on my end (P10).

### ***Maneuvering Ethical Concerns***

Providing virtual school counseling services resulted in school counselors having to maneuver through various ethical concerns. Participants expressed how the lack of physical access to students along with virtually communicating with parents/guardians posed unique challenges and concerns. For example, when speaking about confidentiality and parents overhearing group counseling sessions, one participant explained, ““if your parent might know my parent, and so, if you say something, and my parent hears that, my parent might say something to your parent... the confidentiality pieces... [are] so murky when it comes to virtual” (P9).

In the same regard, another participant shared the challenges related to attempting to increase student engagement through virtual school counseling services while being mindful of confidentiality,

There was no connection... I had kids in their beds... I'm always talking, I would ask them to “Get up out of bed and get out of your room... Let's move around.” Sometimes that wasn't always the best thing because there were many other people in the house (P6).

Another participant expressed ethical concerns surrounding documenting stakeholder interactions and managing students in crisis,

Being held accountable for...”What did you do to reach out to the student?”... I am trying to stalk them [chuckle] and they're not showing up... the most...heart palpitating,

frustrating thing, was trying to deal with crises online. Because it would be like you would get an email from a teacher talking about an assignment that they received in class two days ago that was concerning to them (P2).

Multiple school counselors were faced with handling student crises while providing virtual services. One participant explained,

I can look in their [students'] files and I can see where they've had suicidal thoughts in the past... But then I knew that they're [students] still going through it, they told me as much, but... how do you really check on a kid other than text them and how do you know if they're really okay?" (P1).

### *Navigating New Technology*

The virtual setting resulted in technological adjustments. One participant explained,

I created a virtual office using Bitmojis and links that kids can do when they're stressed and anxious. I felt like I was throwing so much technology and so much stuff [at stakeholders]. I did a couple of workshops in regards to that...in March and April... of having to connect with kids and how to do that in a virtual environment (P6).

Another school counselor detailed adjusting to virtual classes and spoke about the lack of technological support,

All teachers had Zoom meetings... for each of their classes, if you needed to come to their class, you had to have the Zoom link for all the different classes... It was very difficult in that sense of the technology piece in trying to use that. [There] wasn't really a whole lot of support in that tech piece (P8).

On the contrary, a participant spoke about training offered by their district for faculty, staff, parents/guardians, and students. They expressed, "there was a lot of training on Zoom and

etiquette, and all the settings... the communication with parents, and they also had... some type of video showing parents how to Zoom - a refresher. Same for the kids” (P10).

Another school counselor explained their experience helping students’ access technology, which resulted in time away from providing virtual school counseling services,

Initially after the closure in March of 2020, so right when we first closed unexpectedly... that was probably the most difficult time because there was very limited access to students. In [district], they did not all have access to technology, a lot of what I did in the beginning was contacting families and trying to get help. Make sure that they had the resources necessary to get online... and following up with the kids who the teachers were not seeing in class. I was not doing a whole lot of what I would consider counseling activities. In the beginning, I was not teaching lessons... online. I was not meeting individually with students... that was the hardest part (P4).

One participant shared that they enjoyed teaching their students how to use technology and seeing their students active on Zoom,

Sharing my screen and showing a video, it's cool you know? Teaching kids technology... Now we have third, fourth graders that are really good on a computer. They can zoom around on Zoom. It's awesome... that's been very helpful. Students were forced to... check their emails... so all of their information is right there. ...the whole thing of, “I lost my homework,” “I didn't know what to do” - that's not an excuse anymore (P7).

### **Theme 3: The Challenge of Addressing Mental Health Complexities**

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health needs heightened as stakeholders were concerned with political, societal, and health stressors, on top of adjusting to virtual learning. School counselors spoke about addressing boundaries related to mental health needs. It was as if

parents/guardians' needs increased when their students were virtual. Many participants described stakeholders expecting immediate responses. They went on to explain the challenges of work-home balance while providing virtual services. School counselors also spoke about challenges related to addressing stakeholder needs beyond Covid in the virtual setting. Some of the topics mentioned were physical health, loss, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Lastly, school counselors spoke about their own mental health while providing virtual services, which resulted in feelings of depression and guilt. The final theme, *the challenge of addressing mental health complexities*, contains three subthemes, (a) creating boundaries, (b) maintaining awareness of stakeholders' intersecting and multifaceted needs, and (c) struggling with their mental health.

### ***Creating Boundaries***

Participants described the challenges related to creating boundaries while providing virtual school counseling services. They spoke about wanting to address the mental health needs of stakeholders while maintaining a healthy work-home balance, which for many resulted in long hours and malleable boundaries. One participant described their experience as, “very frustrating... I would call families... at that time... everyone's mental health was kind of suffering... I was trying to work from home with two very little kids. I felt like... my time to do certain things was limited” (P9). Another participant explained,

The last thing is the boundaries of wanting, families wanting us to be accessible... 24/7 outside of traditional office hours, and feeling those blurred lines of feeling we needed to be providing services all the time” (P5).

Similarly, a school counselor shared,

Not having those boundaries between work and home... I don't have any downtime anymore... I used to have time to kind of recover from the emotional exhaustion of work,

and I don't have that anymore. There is no break in between. I go straight from one to another.... there's no processing time, no transition time, and so... just in general that has been more challenging for me. These things weigh heavier on me. I take them home with me, I am emotionally tired. I do worry about these kids... there certainly has been an impact on me, I would say a negative one (P4).

Another participant expressed feeling worried and explained the ethical challenges related to addressing mental health complexities while creating boundaries,

But the students who I know, their home life was bad or just they're struggling or I'm worried about their mental state, my ethics just... It went out the window and I'm like, “Nope. Do I need to drive over there and I can talk to you from your driveway? Here's my cell phone number, do you need to text me?” But then we became on call 24/7. So that was hard too, because the working hours... were not... We were a mobile crisis unit... and that was hard 'cause like you're not gonna be able to... Turn that off. So from home, it's hard to do (P3).

### ***Maintaining Awareness of Stakeholders' Intersecting and Multifaceted Needs***

Multiple participants described their awareness that students were facing hardships related to the political and societal climate in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic. One participant shared, “Political... unrest and... I realized that people were dealing with lots of things... In very different ways... the teachers came in burnt out... We came in not okay or fully prepared and worried about our health and safety” (P2). Additionally, counselors expressed concern that their students’ many needs went unmet, due to being virtual. One explained,

That's something that they would wanna go talk to the counselor about... “My mom is sick with a disease,” it's awful, right? That is I think the biggest situation of Covid-19 and

everything along with it. The fear, the anxiety... Students were really afraid. Parents were reaching out to me and saying, "My kid doesn't wanna go outside at all even if it's just me and him walking down the street." That's a big thing. Another big situation is... in the middle of our virtual experience online, there were a lot of racial tensions... going on across [the] United States with the Black Lives Matter marches... I addressed that virtually, but that's another situation where I think a lot of our students were struggling and I wanted to help them... but I felt like it was tougher not being in-person and not being able to have that connection (P7).

Another participant shared how their experience providing virtual school counseling services was impacted by the Black Lives Matter movement and multigenerational households,

My school is in [location], and it's majority Black and Latinx... We had students who have multi-generational homes, and a lot of fears with Covid.... We had students with a lot of loss, not just death to Covid, but other things (P8).

### ***Struggling With Their Mental Health***

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, school counselors spoke about the need to take care of themselves. As a result of providing virtual school counseling services, participants experienced severe burnout. For example, one participant shared,

It circles back to the guilt... everyone handles it different professionally... it was [the] guilt of wanting to do more or wanting to solve the problem... Every time I get an email or every time wanting it to be better for a student (P5).

Similarly, another participant stated,

Tending to other kids' mental health needs while trying to deal with my own... Being stuck at home with two little kids was insane... I'm trying to support other people and I'm

like, I need support. “Who's supporting me?” ...kind of feeling that weight like, “oh my gosh these, these people are counting on me to take care of these things and... I'm struggling to take care of myself right now.” So that was hard (P9).

One participant described their experience as a “professional crisis.” They explained, “the end of the 19-20 school year when we all first went out during Covid, I was in a professional crisis of like how do I even be a counselor virtually?” (P1). Another described their mental health status as,

So personally, I had some issues... I would probably tell you that I went into a depression, that I think I was doing a lot of really good positive work for the [state] school counseling association about building relationships with kids through a virtual...society (P6).

Finally, a school counselor explained how they struggled providing virtual school counseling services and that they remained in their role for the students,

We were seeing all of these issues [racial and health inequities] as students were starting to return to school more, but there was just nothing you could do in the way the system was set up. It was like, “Oh, we still have to focus on academics.” And we're like, “Our kids are losing their shit”... there's a lot of things going on right now'. It just fell on deaf ears, it seems like. It was just not how I'm used to being a counselor, and it was a huge struggle for me the entire year, to just mentally stay there... I only really stayed for the kids (P8).



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this phenomenological investigation of school counselors' experiences providing virtual school counseling services during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants provided rich, candid descriptions of their multidimensional experiences. Specifically, phenomenology was the qualitative approach used to expose participants' first-hand accounts of their common experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This section provides a detailed description of school counselors' shared experiences providing virtual school counseling services during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following themes will be discussed: (a) lack of access to students, (b) forced adjustment, and (c) the challenge of addressing mental health complexities.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Access to Students: Feelings of Frustration and Loss**

When asked about providing virtual school counseling services during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants described how the lack of access to students impacted their experiences. The first theme had three subthemes: (a) hindering relationships: blank screens and students not responding, (b) grieving spontaneous interactions, (c) having concern for students' well-being.

#### ***Hindering Relationships: Blank Screens and Students Not Responding***

Literature suggests, "the helping relationship is the foundation on which the process of counseling and psychotherapy is based" (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016, p. 1). Similarly, the results of this study underscore the crucial importance of relationships, within the counseling process. In particular, the current study indicates a lack of access to students in the virtual setting hindered the counseling relationship, and ultimately the counseling process. Specifically, participants described not having a relationship with students due to not seeing students' faces and not having a reliable method of communication, which consequently negatively impacted the counseling process. While the present study aligned with the findings of Savitz-Romer et al. (2021), the

current investigation extended the limited existing literature, providing a thick, rich description, in order to deepen the understanding of the given construct. Additionally, Dinkmeyer (1967) suggests, “the relationship necessary for counseling children is based upon mutual trust and mutual respect” (p. 201). Expanding on this, in the current study, school counselors’ interactions with students were sparse and limited by technology, causing participants a missed opportunity to build trusting relationships while providing virtual services.

Literature has also described ways in which school counselors can contact parents and guardians to assess student needs (Borup et al., 2020). The current study bolsters the literature, as participants not only contacted parents/guardians to assess student needs, but also to access students virtually. Lastly, participants collaborated with teachers to access students. They often discussed the best means of communicating with students virtually. This intervention aligns with the current literature which suggests school counselors can collaborate and consult with teachers to identify and meet student needs (Borup et al., 2020; Limberg et al., 2020).

### ***Grieving Spontaneous Interactions and Having Concern for Students’ Well-being***

When discussing spontaneous interactions, participants described missing students stopping by their offices, having unplanned interactions in the hallways, and stopping in classrooms to check on students. It was as if all virtual interactions had to be largely planned. Literature suggests the positive effects of check-in/check-out interventions and school counselors being active in classrooms (Clark & Breman, 2009; Crone et al., 2004 in Hawken et al.). Savitz-Romer et al. (2021) described some school counselors not being allowed to pull students from virtual classrooms during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the lack of access to students, school counselors were unable to utilize these described positive interventions and in result, grieved the loss of these interactions.

Further, spontaneous interactions with students often result in informally assessing for physical signs of abuse and identifying mental and physical health concerns (i.e., seeing signs of physical abuse, malnourishment, hygiene and health concerns, etc.). The lack of spontaneous interactions directly relates to school counselors' concern for students' well-being in the virtual setting. Literature suggests that students in the virtual setting experience hardships beyond academic achievement, such as food insecurity, access to healthcare, and social isolation (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Martin & Sorensen, 2020). Previous researchers also found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, students and families lost access to multiple in-person services offered by K-12 schools such as health services (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Martin & Sorensen, 2020), food, and shelter (Johnson et al., 2021). Due to school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, an increased number of potential abusive situations have not been identified or reported by school personnel (Baron et al., 2020). The literature on student well-being in the virtual setting validates school counselors' related concerns. In the current study, counselors expressed feeling worried for students' safety and wondering if students were *okay*. Additionally, school counselors lacked access to students leaving them uncertain of students' current mental and physical health status. One participant even explained that upon resuming in-person services, they experienced an influx in CPS reports, which echoes Baron et al.'s (2020) findings, though specific for a school counseling sample.

## **Theme 2: Forced Adjustment**

Given the unprecedented time in education during the Covid-19 pandemic, school counselors were forced to adjust to virtual services. The second theme, *forced adjustment*, resulted in three subthemes: (a) facilitating reactive practices and feelings of failure, (b) maneuvering ethical concerns, (c) navigating new technology.

### *Facilitating Reactive Practices and Feelings of Failure and Maneuvering Ethical Concerns*

School counselors are separate from teachers, with distinct roles, standards, governing bodies, ethical codes, and so forth (ASCA, 2019a). Therefore, they require their own guidelines while providing virtual school counseling services. Unfortunately, during the Covid-19 pandemic, school counselors were left often on their own to figure out how to adjust and deliver a virtual school counseling program. They described feeling as if their practices were reactive and a sense of failure - as if services were trial and error. Previous literature has described teacher and administrator roles providing virtual services during the Covid-19 pandemic (Borup et al., 2020); however, there is a lack of literature on school counselors' roles. This gap in the literature mirrors participants' experiences of reactive practices- that they were typically responding without content or knowledge for the virtual modality.

It is no surprise that the use of reactive practices resulted in feelings of failure and having to maneuver through ethical concerns. Participants described the lack of policies and procedures related to providing virtual school counseling ethics, particularly crisis response practices. School counselors are separate from teachers, with distinct roles, standards, governing bodies, ethical codes, and so forth (ASCA, 2019a). Therefore, they require their own guidelines while providing virtual school counseling services.

While adjusting to providing virtual school counseling services, participants were faced with addressing various ethical concerns, including the lack of crisis response policies and procedures from building, district, and state leaders. This finding in the lack of ethical virtual school counseling services is extremely concerning considering school counselors are one of the only or few mental health professionals in the K-12 setting and are often first responders to

crises. School counselors are also considered crisis response leaders (ASCA, 2019b) and are a crucial part of crisis response teams and policy making.

Hence, the present investigation is the first known study to speak to school counselors' experiences providing virtual school counseling services, including the necessary logistics— thus providing innovative content to the school counseling literature.

### ***Navigating New Technology***

Given the nature of virtual school counseling, participants were tasked with navigating new technology. They described learning how to operate technology while also teaching stakeholders how to use technology. Also, in the current study, participants noted increased student engagement as one benefit of using technology. These findings reinforce literature which suggests a benefit of virtual learning is that students can take control of their learning environment, causing a decrease in social anxiety and increase in focus (Arizona State University Prep Digital, 2019). As of current, there is no research on the school counselors' role navigating technology or teaching stakeholders how to use technology while providing virtual school counseling services; as such, the present study addresses an important gap in the literature.

### **Theme 3: The Challenge of Addressing Mental Health Complexities**

School counselors faced multiple challenges while attempting to create boundaries within the virtual setting. Due to school closures, many were forced to work from home, which included caring for family members and being out of their office, while attempting to meet the evolving needs of their already complex jobs, including supporting stakeholders. Additionally, they were faced with caring for their own mental health while adjusting to their new role as a virtual school counselor. Hence, participant experiences echoed the mental health crisis felt throughout the world during the Covid-19 pandemic. The final theme, *The Challenge of Addressing Mental*

*Health Complexities*, resulted in three subthemes: (a) creating boundaries, (b) maintaining awareness of stakeholders' intersecting and multifaceted needs, and (c) struggling with their mental health.

***Creating Boundaries and Maintaining Awareness of Stakeholders' Intersecting and Multifaceted Needs***

The pandemic has had a profoundly negative impact on communities' economic status and physical health (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Students and families were faced with challenges related to food insecurity, health, and social isolation (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Martin & Sorensen, 2020). In a similar vein, school counselors were tasked with addressing political stressors, societal distress, and racial inequities throughout the K-12 education system (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2020). Covid-19 has brought about new student concerns related to health and safety (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Martin & Sorensen, 2020), social isolation (Hanover Research, 2020), family support (Bansak & Starr, 2021), and academics (Middleton, 2020), all which school counselors are required to address. Furthermore, Pincus et al. (2020) conceptually illustrated how school counselors are mental health professionals, making them critical in addressing the impacts of Covid-19 on the K-12 student population.

Expanding on this previous research, participants in the present study communicated attempting to maintain boundaries while meeting the evolving and heightened needs of stakeholders and the greater society as a whole. Thus, the school counselors in the current investigation echoed the literature base, reinforcing the immense mental health needs in the greater society, as a result of the pandemic. Along those lines, school counselors expressed that stakeholder needs appeared to increase during the pandemic, causing an increased demand for

school counseling services. For example, participants described parents/caretakers and students contacting them outside of school hours. Others explained that due to heightened needs and the virtual setting, the expectation regarding timely communication increased to an unrealistic expectation. For example, parents/caregivers would send an email in the evening and expect a response prior to the school day starting in the morning.

Overall, school counselors', who are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students in all K-12 settings (i.e., in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings) (ASCA, 2019a). And as such, were at the forefront of addressing these student needs during the Covid-19 pandemic. The new territory of virtual school counseling, in combination with an increase in mental health needs meant some stakeholders had relatively instant access to school counselors through email, phone, and other electronic means of communication. Thus, school counselors described an increase in stakeholder needs while providing virtual school counseling services; this finding reiterates the importance of creating and maintaining boundaries in the virtual setting. In providing virtual services without boundaries, school counselors are at risk for working around the clock, which could negatively impact counselors' mental health and cause an increase in burnout. Furthermore, Villares et al. (2022) indicated school counselors who provided less direct services to students experienced higher burnout rates than those who provided more direct services. Relatedly, participants from the current study expressed burnout (e.g., poor mental health, feeling frustrated and worthless in their roles) due to lack of access to students, which ultimately limited their ability to provide direct services. School counselors' experiences setting boundaries while attempting to meet stakeholders' needs in the virtual school environment has yet to be explored; making our findings novel to the profession.

### *Struggling With Their Mental Health*

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, this study highlighted the mental health status of school counselors providing virtual services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only were school counselors' seeing these needs in their student and stakeholder groups, they faced similar challenges related to social isolation, mental health concerns, political stressors, and racial inequities— and also worked to maintain health work boundaries. Echoing the literature which suggests Covid-19 related school closures caused primary caregivers to become academic educators to their children (Bansak & Starr, 2021), current participants described caring for their children at home while providing virtual services professionally- thus balancing two competing sets of tasks. This reported challenge offers new insight into the many roles school counselors maintained while providing virtual services- including juggling home and work commitments. In addition to work/life balance, participants described students' functioning within a harsh political climate fueled by racial injustices and social/economic inequities, which also impacted the participants' own mental health. Expanding the literature which indicated school counselors who provided less direct services to students during Covid-19 experienced higher burnout rates than those who provided more direct services (Villares et al., 2022), participants' inability to access students and also have frequent, spontaneous interactions caused rapid burnout; this concept of Covid-19 burnout has not yet been widely explored in the literature- bolstering the need for the present investigation.

Despite the mental health and work/life balance experienced by a number of school counselors in the present study, they also described their intense commitment to care for themselves, to ensure they could care for their students. One participant explained they wanted to resign; however, they stayed for their students. As seen in the literature, school counselors are



often motivated by helping the profession (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994). To mirror this scholarship, despite the many challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic and school counselors' required virtual services, at the same time, these school counselors demonstrated resilience and rose to the occasion— out of their commitment and passion for serving their students and schools.

### **Limitations**

Although phenomenological research and individual interviews can provide rich information, there are a few limitations to consider. In following trustworthiness strategies listed previously, the researcher bracketed assumptions and biases through reflexive journaling and memos after each interview, coding session, and coding meeting. At the same time, in alignment with my philosophical underpinnings/theoretical lens, a researcher can never fully remove their biases and assumptions, which will impact the study to some degree. Additionally, although interviews can generate valuable content, this study could be strengthened by using multiple types of data, to bolster trustworthiness by and seeing patterns across multiple types of data (e.g., focus group interview, observations, participant journal, etc.). In the future, the addition of focus groups could capture conversations and interactions between participants (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Implications**

Implications informed by this study's findings include determining ways to access stakeholders, planning for potential future unforeseen adjustments from in-person to virtual school counseling services (similar to crisis response planning), and determining ways to address mental health complexities in the virtual school counseling setting. It is recommended that these three considerations should be the foundation for developing virtual school counseling practices, preparation, and policies.

## **Implications for Practice**

It is important to note that the following implications for practice are intended to be malleable and adaptable based on resources available and unique stakeholder needs. Based on our findings, the following implications for practice have been identified: (a) maintain updated student/family/emergency contact information, (b) create a virtual school counseling office with office hours, (c) communicate with teachers on how school counselors can request students from class, (d) utilize text message applications or school issued cell phone, and (e) address the mental health of students and school counselors.

### ***Maintain Updated Student/Family/Emergency Contact Information***

In the current study, school counselors' expressed that a lack of access to students significantly impacted their ability to provide virtual school counseling services. Thus, schools must ensure student, families', and emergency contact information be updated frequently throughout the school year. In the event that schools are forced to abruptly close their doors, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, reliable contact information will help eliminate barriers to access.

### ***Virtual School Counseling Office***

Other implications for practice include having a virtual school counseling office to increase accessibility. Students could then spontaneously seek virtual services as needed and stakeholders would be aware of virtual office hours, resulting in boundary setting. For confidentiality and boundary purposes, it is recommended that a waiting room feature be used prior to students entering the virtual office. Additionally, the link can be shared via the school counseling department website to increase stakeholder accessibility.

### ***Requesting Students from Class***

Expanding on access to students, school counselors can collaborate with teachers to discuss the best way to request students from the classroom. For example, it could be best practice for school counselors to message teachers requesting students, followed by teachers then sending students a private message and link to the school counselors' virtual office. This would avoid counselors tracking down students in virtual classrooms, disrupting instruction time, and singling students out in the virtual classroom.

### ***Text Messaging as a Communication Method***

Another practical implication informed by the current study surrounds the use of text messages. School counselors in the present study described how text messaging was one of the primary forms of communication with students and families. Participants described not wanting stakeholders to have their personal phone numbers due to lack of boundaries and work-life balance; however, there was no alternative at the time. These findings highlight the need for text messaging applications or school issued cell phones for school counselors who are providing virtual school counseling services- which would also reinforce/establish boundaries (i.e., set automated out of office message with information to emergency services) and address confidentiality concerns (i.e., locked or secure platform solely for school counseling communication).

### ***Address the Mental Health of Students and School Counselors***

As discussed throughout our study, the mental health of students and school counselors must be addressed. There are multiple practices school counselors can use while providing virtual services to address mental health. Counselors can provide virtual classroom lessons on coping skills specific to virtual schooling (i.e., social isolation, anxiety, depression). These

lessons can also serve as an outlet for students to express their mental health needs. Additionally, counselors can run small open groups where students can join a virtual room to meet with the school counselor. These open group sessions can increase virtual accessibility to the school counselor. School counselors can also speak with and educate various stakeholders (i.e., families, teachers, and administrators) regarding students' mental health status and needs. Considering the current study suggests academic needs appeared to take precedence over mental health needs during Covid-19, school counselors can continue to educate stakeholders on their role in addressing student mental health and how mental health impacts student performance.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, school counselors must take care of their own mental health. Our study exposed the negative impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on school counselors' mental health while providing virtual school counseling services. School counselors must set boundaries with stakeholders to avoid working outside of work hours. They also can seek support through various avenues such as mental health counseling, meeting with colleagues, or talking with friends and family. For example, school counselors can develop a process group where various school counselors meet (via Zoom) weekly to process their experience providing virtual school counseling services. School counselors' schedules are and caseloads are full; however, practices to take care of their own mental health must be a top priority in order for them to best serve students.

In summary, there are various virtual school counseling practices available for counselors to adopt. The five described above are a platform for additional, more specialized practices.

### **Implications for Preparation**

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the need for school counselor education/preparation programs to prepare counselors for providing virtual school counseling services. The findings

from our study indicate the need for training related to accessing students, planning for the transition from in-person to virtual counseling, and addressing mental health concerns in the virtual setting. The following implications for preparation have been suggested based on this study's findings: (a) virtual school counseling practices, (b) virtual school counseling ethics, (c) opportunities for virtual collaboration, and (d) advocacy in the virtual school environment.

### ***Virtual School Counseling Practices***

The current study highlighted the need for training regarding practices specific to virtual school counseling. Fortunately, school counseling in person practices can serve as a framework for virtual practices; however, the access to students and other stakeholders is drastically different. Therefore, I recommend teaching school counselors how to implement strategies to increase access to students and stakeholder in order to provide virtual services. For example, school counselors in training can learn ways to set up a virtual school counseling office. They can also learn ways to increase student engagement such as using breakout rooms in classroom lessons, interactive activities such as free online games (i.e., Kahoot), making students editors of shared documents and asking them to contribute to lessons by editing/adding to documents (i.e., creating Google Slides, Google Jam Board, etc.), and using the whiteboard feature on Zoom.

School counselors can also be taught how to alter practices to create a more equitable virtual school counseling environment. For example, one practice suggested by a participant in our study was the use of virtual show and tell (i.e., turn camera on and show object). Expanding on this practice, school counselors can be taught how to use practices like show and tell with students who do not have access to turning their cameras on. Alternatively, they can share their screens to show a picture or drawing, or create and share a PowerPoint slide. If sharing screens is not an option, students can email or the school counselor a drawing, picture, PowerPoint slide,

then the school counselor can share their screen and the student can speak. Similarly, the chat feature can also be used to share content and students can unmute to discuss shared content.

In conclusion, various in person practices can be altered to meet the needs of virtual students. School counselors must be prepared to alter their practices and develop equitable strategies to implement said practices. It is recommended that counselor educators and trainers incorporate both in person and virtual practices into their curricula (i.e., present practice and how it can be used in both settings).

### ***Virtual School Counseling Ethics***

Our study also highlighted the need for and access to virtual school counseling ethical standards and practices. Some school counselors were unaware of ethics pertaining to accessing students, confidentiality, and handling crises. Others expressed not knowing where to access information pertaining to ethics while providing virtual school counseling services. It is recommended that school counselor educators and trainers incorporate ethics specific to virtual counseling in their curricula. Additionally, they can provide trainers with resources on how to locate ethical standards.

For example, school counselors must be prepared to address confidentiality while providing virtual school counseling services. As highlighted in our study, individual counseling and small group sessions pose unique confidentiality challenges in the virtual setting. School counselor educators and trainers should review ways to navigate confidentiality such as, asking students to meet in a room with a closed door when possible, reminding students that people around nearby may hear them, and suggesting headphones when possible. This is one of many ways in which school counselor educators and trainers can teach virtual school counseling practices to address ethical considerations.

### ***Opportunities for Virtual Collaboration***

Our study also called attention to the need for education on virtual collaboration opportunities, along with various ways for school counselors to collaborate with stakeholders while providing virtual school counseling services. Findings indicate counselor educators and trainers can discuss the benefits of virtual collaboration such as: (a) identifying access to students, (b) student needs, and (c) resources beyond the school building. In the current study, participants described collaborating with teachers to identify the most effective way to contact students. They also spoke about a disconnect between administrators' priorities addressing student academics, and their priority of addressing mental health needs. This disconnect could have been addressed or avoided if there were collaborative efforts to identify and meet student needs. Lastly, due to inability to access in person school resources, school counselors can collaborate with community organizations to connect students/families with resources. Overall, virtual and in person collaboration opportunities are very similar in that the common goal is to identify and meet student needs.

### ***Advocacy in the Virtual School Environment***

Lastly, school counselor educators and trainers can provide training on advocacy in the virtual school environment. Participants from the current study highlighted the need to address student concerns beyond academics. They spoke about the need for advocacy related to the ability to discuss political, societal, and economic stressors with students. Additionally, school counselors can learn ways to advocate for virtual resources such as 1:1 devices, internet for communities, and home delivery food free/reduced breakfast and lunch programs. Advocacy efforts vary based on communities and student needs; however, being mindful of the needs of students in the virtual environment is a key in identifying opportunities for advocacy.

## **Implications for Policy**

Our study also exposed the need for the establishment of policies related to virtual school counseling services. (a) communicating with stakeholders, (b) crisis response, and (c) virtual counseling duties/expectations. It is important to note that policies should vary and evolve based on student needs and available resources.

### ***Communicating with Stakeholders***

Participants described challenges communicating with stakeholders related to access and boundaries. Thus, schools and districts should develop policies on how school counselors should communicate with stakeholders (i.e., phone call or text from school issued phone, email, school platform, etc.). Policies should also include standard communication hours and how to direct stakeholders after hours through an automated messaging and answering system. Overall, a standard communication policy must be in place to maintain access to stakeholders and boundaries in communication.

### ***Crisis Response***

There is a need for specific virtual school counseling crisis response guidelines, considerations, and standards, which should be or already have been established by professional school counseling associations and school districts. Districts should distribute existing information on crisis response to all school counselors and not assume all counselors are members of professional organizations. In regards to accessing students in crisis, participants described the need for guidelines surrounding home visits and wellness checks. Some areas of concern were: (a) when should a home visit be conducted, (b) how should home visits be conducted, and (c) who should school counselors report concerning findings to? Additionally, virtual crisis response teams could be established, guidelines for students in crisis could be



distributed to teachers, and school counselors' virtual office links could be provided to students in crisis.

### ***Virtual Counseling Duties/Expectations***

As previously mentioned, school counselors are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students in all K-12 settings (i.e., in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings) (ASCA, 2019a). Therefore, the duties and expectations of school counselors should be similar regardless of the setting. School counselors providing virtual services during Covid-19 were often tasked with clerical work such as changing students' enrollment status between in person and virtual settings, tracking attendance, and updating contact information. Unfortunately, these tasks took time away from addressing the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students, which were heightened during the Covid-19 pandemic. In summary, virtual and in person counseling duties and expectations should be identical.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Covid-19 is a virus which first took the world by surprise, beginning in 2019-2020. The impact of this relatively new phenomenon has yet to be deeply explored in many facets, and especially within the world of school counseling. This study is a catalyst for more specialized future research. For example, future studies could focus on school counselors meeting the needs of specific student groups (i.e., LGBTQ+, students receiving special education services or gifted services, grade levels, etc.). As future studies are conducted, researchers can focus their intentions on diving deeper into the role of the school counselor during Covid-19 (i.e., working with families, providing community support, collaborating with colleagues, returning to the school building, hybrid services, etc.), to expose more specific information. Such studies could be both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of U.S. school counselors providing virtual services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. A nation-wide perspective is beneficial to generalize how the federal education system could better support and prepare school counselors going virtual during uncertain times. As mentioned, future specialized research (i.e., student population, location, grade-level, etc.) surrounding the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 could better inform national school counseling practices (such as ASCA recommendations), professional development efforts, school counselor education curricula, and CACREP standards.

Since this study's results are unique to the experiences in the U.S., it is recommended that future research take place in other geographical locations to best represent all school counselors' experiences and the phenomena of Covid-19. It would be beneficial to conduct similar studies across various states, regions, and countries to inform local practices, policies, and procedures. It is also important to keep in mind that multiple changes in state and local education policies during Covid-19 may impact participant experiences; therefore, each experience is unique to the rules, regulations, and policies related to their virtual requirements.

## CHAPTER SIX: MANUSCRIPT

### **The experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during covid-19: A phenomenological investigation**

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#### **Abstract**

School counselors are trained in providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to K-12 students. In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic took the world of K-12 education by surprise, forcing school counselors to deliver a virtual school counseling program with little to no time for preparation. School counselors were faced with meeting the seemingly ever-changing needs of K-12 students as social, political, and health concerns evolved throughout the pandemic. Although schools have since begun to reopen their doors, the effects of Covid-19 are far from over. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of United States (U.S.) public school counselors providing virtual services to K-12 students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This valuable insight into the world of virtual school counseling during Covid-19 will serve as a platform for the development of future practices, training, and counselor education curricula.

*Keywords:* school counseling, virtual, Covid-19, K-12 education

## **The experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during covid-19: A phenomenological investigation**

In or around March 2020, Covid-19 forced K-12 schools throughout the United States (U.S.) to close their doors to in-person learning, causing faculty, staff, administrators, students, families, and communities to quickly develop interventions for virtual learning to limit loss of “instruction time” (Varela & Fedynich, 2020, p. 1). Although studies have investigated the impact of Covid-19 with a focus on teacher training and teacher experiences (Hamilton, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020), the experiences of school counselors related to Covid-19 have yet to be explored. School counselors are responsible for serving the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a), making research pertaining to school counseling and the Covid-19 pandemic crucial for K-12 student success.

### **Covid-19 and School Counselors**

It could be argued that students required new and additional support due to Covid-19 and the change in learning climate. Covid-19 has brought about new student concerns related to health and safety (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Martin & Sorensen, 2020), social isolation (Hanover Research, 2020), family support (Bansak & Starr, 2021), and academics (Middleton, 2020), all which school counselors are required to address. While planning and attempting to meet the needs of students during Covid-19, school counselors may have found themselves lacking support, training, and knowledge. In a survey of K-12 teachers during Covid-19, results identified additional support teachers required during the pandemic such as strategies to adapt curriculum, virtual lesson planning tools, addressing the loss of hands-on student learning, social and emotional support strategies, student engagement strategies in the

virtual setting, and technical support, to mention a few (Hamilton et al., 2020). These findings most likely indicate that school counselors are and were also in need of unique support during Covid-19; however, there is not yet research exploring school counselor experiences related to support.

### **Systems Theory: Covid-19 and School Counseling**

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory assumes an individual is impacted by multiple environmental factors that are within a "nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next" (p. 514). Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as a conceptual framework, we begin with Covid-19 as the overarching system located within the exosystem.

### **Students**

Among the multiple systems impacted, and arguably those most affected by K-12 school closures due to Covid-19, are students. As previously mentioned, students are part of the microsystem, which is the closest system to directly impact participants in this study. Schools have been forced to deliver their programs virtually and K-12 professionals have also been faced with the challenge of continuing to meet student needs, which are still evolving due to Covid-19. Students encountered multiple challenges related to adjusting to a virtual learning environment and school closures which for many, included hardships beyond maintaining academic standing (e.g., food insecurity, access to healthcare, and social isolation) (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Martin & Sorensen, 2020). Although some found the virtual classroom challenging, others found it beneficial and may even choose to remain virtual, resulting in districts planning to offer virtual schooling options post Covid-19 (Li & Lalani, 2020).

## **Administrators and Leadership**

The next system discussed consists of administrators and leadership which is also located within the microsystem. Among those on the frontlines of education during and post Covid-19 are federal, state, district, and building administrators. When school closures began in the US, these leaders were faced with rapid decision-making processes regarding how to navigate public health while delivering a K-12 curriculum (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). They often had limited time for planning and there was a lack of procedures in place on how to proceed during the unforeseen pandemic. Administrators faced challenges related to guiding teachers, students, and parents/guardians while having to quickly respond to and plan for Covid-19. As of current, there is limited research exploring the experiences of K-12 administration and leadership during and post Covid-19 (Varela & Fedynich, 2020).

One of the few studies published explored a South Texas school district leadership team during Covid-19. 30 school leaders (principals and superintendents) completed a Likert scale online survey which consisted of 15 questions (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). The survey assessed “their experiences during school closures” which inevitably also assessed their transition to virtual learning (Varela & Fedynich, 2020, p. 4). Among the scaling questions asked was, “The COVID-19 pandemic will change how I lead my campus/school district in the future” (p. 6). On a 5-scale rating of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, 50% of respondents indicated that they “agree” and 47% stated they “strongly agree” with this statement. This staggering majority of participants (97%) indicates that school administrators recognize the everlasting impact of Covid-19 on their leadership practices. Not only will school counselors be led under new or reformed administrative practices, but these results could also indicate that school counselors will lead and advocate differently due to Covid-19.

## Teachers

As previously mentioned, teachers are also a system within the microsystem that faced multiple challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite many teachers having limited to no training on how to deliver a virtual K-12 curriculum, they were forced to navigate the territory of virtual learning (Ferdig et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). In a study that explored the experiences of 334 teachers beginning virtual learning during Covid-19, “participants identified several challenges, including accessing, evaluating, learning to use, designing instruction with, and supporting student and family use of technology” (Trust & Whalen, 2021, para 1). Researchers suggest these identified challenges could inform teacher education programs along with district policy development surrounding virtual services.

In another study, Pressley (2021) that looked at teacher self-efficacy related to providing virtual services during the Covid-19 pandemic. 329 elementary school teachers throughout the U.S. completed the Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES). Results indicated that teachers who were providing solely virtual services reported lower instructional efficacy compared to those teaching hybrid or in-person. Researchers suggested multiple ways administrators can increase teacher self-efficacy including (a) provide observations and feedback regarding instruction, (b) encourage success by reminding teachers of prior successes, and (c) provide professional development opportunities to inform teachers of virtual instructional strategies.

In a single case-study that looked at a teacher’s professional life during Covid-19, researchers suggested educators intentionally design their virtual services while being mindful of student inequities and societal needs (Kaden, 2020). This intentionality requires specialized training related to K-12 virtual learning. Another study investigated teacher’s pedagogical practices within the virtual setting (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). Authors suggest that educators

continue to incorporate virtual learning into the K-12 setting post Covid-19 in preparation for future events that cause schoolwide closures.

### **School Counselors**

School counselors were faced with addressing Covid-19, in addition to political stressors, societal distress, and racial inequities throughout the K-12 education system (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2020). As previously mentioned, school counselors are part of the microsystem and provide all students with academic, career, and social/emotional support. School counselors are both educators and mental health professionals (ACA, 2021; ASCA, n.d.). As educators, school counselors' experiences may share some similarities to those of teachers and administrators during Covid-19. For example, school counselors may have also lacked support related to virtual curriculum development and delivery (Hamilton et al., 2020); however, their school counseling curriculum (or program) primarily focuses on social and emotional learning in addition to academic support. Often, school counselors will collaborate with other educators to address student needs. In a study previously discussed pertaining to Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) as a framework to support students during Covid-19, Borup et al. (2020) found that school counselors contacted parents and guardians to assess student needs. Teachers also electronically referred student concerns and needs to counselors. These referrals generally surrounded "access and navigation support" pertaining to the virtual setting.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 also acted as a barrier to K-12 collaboration efforts. Limberg et al. (2021) explored the experiences of 15 school counselors and 26 teachers who participated in a professional development program about using project-based learning (PBL) to facilitate student career development. School counselors and teachers were taught how to collaborate and use PBL to deliver a career curriculum to students. Although the study was not focused on Covid-19, due



to the study (i.e., 2021) taking place around the time of school shutdowns, teachers and school counselors' experiences were impacted by Covid-19 and the adjustment to virtual learning. As a result, researchers found school counselors may be behind in their curriculum due to providing virtual services (e.g., classroom lessons) and face "barriers to collaboration" (Limberg et al., 2021, p. 6). In this study, the barriers to collaboration due to Covid-19 were mentioned; however, they were not explored. Given the broad and everlasting impact Covid-19 has had on the education system and student needs, understanding the role of the school counselor as it relates to Covid-19 is essential.

### **Crisis Response**

Since school counselors are one of the only or few mental health professionals in the K-12 setting, they are often first responders to crises. The American School Counseling Association lists twelve crisis prevention and support practices in The School Counselor and Safe Schools and Crisis Response position statement (2019b), all of which could be applied to Covid-19 response. School counselors are also considered crisis response leaders (ASCA, 2019b) and are a crucial part of crisis response teams and policy making. Considering the Covid-19 pandemic was a crisis that impacted all K-12 schools to some capacity, school counselors played a critical role in crisis response.

Covid-19 has exposed the need for specialized training related to virtual school counseling program development and delivery (Crumb & Jones, 2021). Although most U.S. K-12 public school counselors are required to hold a master's degree in school counseling, their degree of training to perform virtual school counseling remains unclear. For instance, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) sets the standard for accredited school counselor education programs (Council for Accreditation of

Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2021b). Although section 5 of the CACREP standards discusses school counseling preparation, they fail to mention training school counselors in virtual modalities specifically. Some virtual schools have historically existed, and limited school counselors have been employed in these schools, but to my knowledge, there is limited research on virtual school counseling, and no research related to virtual school counseling during Covid-19. Thus, there is no known research on school counseling in virtual settings during Covid-19.

Overall, understanding the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 can inform school counseling practices during a crisis, aid with school reopening plans, and offer insight into providing students with virtual school counseling in the future. The experiences can inform school counselor education programs along with professional development efforts regarding meeting the needs of students during and after school closures and related crises. Lastly, understanding the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 will also aid in preparing school counselors for careers in virtual school counseling, which appear to be more in demand than ever because of Covid-19.

### ***The Lasting Effects of Covid-19 on the US Education System***

The evolving and high-stakes nature of the Covid-19 crisis will likely have both short and long-lasting impacts of K-12 U.S. education. In the short-term, research suggests that schools must reopen with safety plans in place (Johnson et al., 2021). Multiple studies have been conducted to discuss reopening school plans during and post Covid-19 to include policies on social distancing (Pattison et al., 2021), the use of masks (España et al., 2020), testing for Covid-19 and contact tracing (Johnson et al., 2021), and the use of task forces to make decisions (Dibner et al., 2020).

For instance, findings from Espana and colleagues (2020) indicated the effectiveness of facemasks and reopening at lower occupancy rates in an effort to lower infection rates. In another study, researchers partnered with the American School Health Association (ASHA) to explore school staff needs related to schools reopening post Covid-19 (Pattison et al., 2021). This study consisted of 375 ASHA member survey respondents from 45 states throughout the US. Respondents' top concerns regarding returning to in-person instruction included the following: *feasibility of social distancing (93.6%), resurgence of COVID-19 (92.8%), and the availability of health supplies (88.8%)* (Pattison et al., 2021, para 1). Pattison et al. (2021) suggest educators consider reopening plans from a holistic perspective including *Whole School, Whole Community, and Whole Child* models to meet student and community needs (para 1). Additionally, Dibner et al. (2020) suggests schools develop a task force to address reopening plans. Task forces can consist of families, local health officials, school staff, and other community members.

In addition to short-term, immediate educational implications, scholars have also suggested that Covid-19 may also have long-last lasting implications as well. Due to the benefits of the virtual school setting, including reducing impacts of social anxiety (Arizona State University Prep Digital, 2019), increased student autonomy over their education (Torchia, 2021), and increased student access to healthcare needs (Black et al., 2020), districts are opting to offer permeant virtual school options (Li & Lalani, 2020). With an increase in virtual K-12 schools, it is reasonable to infer that virtual school counseling is now an established position within the K-12 system, and there will be an increase in virtual school counseling positions.

### **Rationale and Purpose of the Study**

Research on staff members' professional experiences navigating the Covid-19 pandemic is in infancy and has been primarily focused on administrators and teachers. One voice that has

been absent in the research is that of school counselors. Since school counselors are the only professionals in the K-12 education system responsible for providing a comprehensive program to meet the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students, along with the only professionals trained as both educators and mental health counselors (ACA, 2021; ASCA, n.d.), exploring their role within the education system during Covid-19 is essential.

### **Methods**

Phenomenology is an approach used in qualitative research which exposes participants' first-hand accounts to highlight their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher aims to describe participant first-hand experiences from their perspective while being conscious of how their perception influences overall conclusions made. To best represent participant experiences, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

I am a third-year doctoral candidate at Old Dominion University (ODU) studying Counselor Education and Supervision with a projected graduation date of May 2022. I earned my master's degree in Education with a concentration in School Counseling from ODU in Norfolk, VA. I am school counseling license eligible. It is important to note I was teaching at a university during March 2020, which was during the initial transition period from in person to the virtual learning for the K-12 and higher education settings due to Covid-19. I identify as an educator and may have shared experiences with participants from this regard (i.e., perception of institutional support, state policies surrounding education, struggles students faced, etc.). Since health concerns, policies, and regulations quickly evolved into political debates throughout the US in 2020, it is important to conclude with my views on the Covid-19 pandemic. I found that safety and health were paramount for all citizens and that social distancing, wearing masks, and

sanitizing often were essential to limit the spread of Covid-19 and to save lives.

## **Participants**

Literature suggests a phenomenon is best explored through the experiences of 10-12 participants (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). The present study consisted of 10 U.S. public school counselors across 4 states. Since the focus was to explore the experiences of school counselors providing virtual services throughout Covid-19, participants must have met the following inclusion criteria: (a) have been/were employed as a school counselor by a U.S. public school for at least one academic year since 2019 and (b) have provided virtual school counseling services [e.g., email, video, phone, etc. w/ students, families, staff, etc.] at some point throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, participants must have been willing to share their candid experiences with researchers.

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. First, we invited professional school counseling organizations (state and national level) to share the recruitment materials via email and social media. We also posted recruitment information to social media platforms and emailed school counseling professionals (i.e., practicing school counselors, counselor educators, district coordinators, ODU alumni, etc.) throughout our networks. Snowball sampling was used to gain information on other potential participants. Specifically, recruitment materials included a Google Form link and a variation of a catchy phrase (i.e., US Public School Counselors!!! Help us learn about your experience providing virtual services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Follow the link below). The Google Form (Appendix A) contained most of the recruitment information including a brief overview of the study, researcher contact information, and the IRB number. The form also asked participants for the following information: (a) to identify if they met the inclusion criteria, (b) name (first, last), (c) email

address, (d) phone number, and (e) 3 options for their 1-hour Zoom interview (date/time).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The two forms of data collected were (a) participant demographic information and (b) semi-structured interviews. As previously mentioned, participant demographics were collected via Google Forms prior to each interview.

Using semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is not bound to the interview protocol; they are able to ask questions out of sequence, change questions, and omit questions (Hays & Singh, 2012). This style of interview allows the interviewer to discover information beyond the original protocol. Individual interviews typically consist of 5-10 interview questions and last about 30-60 minutes (Hays & Singh, 2012). Since the study is about experiences, I asked open-ended questions to encourage elaborate and detailed responses from participants. Interview questions are often “the sub-questions in the research study, phrased in a way that interviewees can understand” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom, an interactive web-based video platform (Zoom, 2021). Zoom allowed me greater access to participants since no travel time or financial resources (i.e., transportation, housing, time off, etc.) were required. Additionally, demographic information was collected via Google Forms during the informed consent process.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making meaning out of collected information. After conducting and transcribing interviews, we used Moustakas (1994) modified version of Kaam’s (1959, 1966) data analysis framework to conceptualize participants’ lived experiences. Moustakas (1994) suggests using the entire interview transcript throughout the data analysis

process. The following steps were taken: 1. listing and preliminary grouping, 2. reduction and elimination, 3. clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, 4. final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: validation, 5. using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher an *individual textural description* of the experience. 6. construct for each co-researcher an *individual structural description* of the experience based on the individual textural description and imaginative variation, and 7. construct *for each research participant a textural-Structural description* of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121).

Beginning with step 1, two researchers read through the transcripts and noted their thoughts and reactions, which were discussed during a follow up meeting. During this meeting, both researchers discussed potential themes, and the first round of themes were established. Then, the first researcher read through the transcripts again, highlighting and assigning codes to meaningful content. The second author then reviewed the coded transcripts and noted areas of agreement and disagreement. The two researchers met again to discuss the transcripts and ultimately came to a consensus on all coded transcripts. During step 2, the first researcher exported all codes and corresponding transcript quotes into a Google sheet, developing a code book. Then, both researchers independently reviewed the code book, making note of quotes that fit better under certain themes and themes that could be collapsed or blended. The researchers met again to discuss quotes and themes, and as consensus was made, moved quotes throughout the code book and combined or eliminated certain themes. During step 3, the researchers met and used the code book to develop rich descriptions of the themes. Lastly, during this meeting the

researchers discussed the overall experiences of participants and the significance of their shared experiences.

### **Trustworthiness Strategies**

Given the nature of a phenomenological study, the researcher is a primary tool in determining the research focus and exploring participant experiences (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). While considering the integral role of the researcher, it is relatively inevitable that bias, world view, and values influence the results to some extent (Hays & Singh, 2012). For this reason, multiple trustworthiness strategies were used to minimize researcher impact and convey participants' experiences in their purest form. Using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness, the following are outlined below: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

Credibility refers to how well researchers portrayed participant perceptions (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Methods used to ensure credibility were: (a) member checking (i.e., transcripts sent to participants for review), (b) frequent research team meetings, and (c) an external auditor. In regards to transferability, Goodman-Scott & Cholewa (in press) stress the importance of illustrating participant experiences in-depth so that the reader can draw conclusions between the study results and their own experience. Researchers described the process using thick descriptions and through an audit trail (i.e., journaling, memos, coding book) which illustrated the research process.

Dependability refers to how clearly researchers illustrate the steps taken throughout a study (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in process; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers created an audit trail to illustrate the research process and engaged in triangulation by collecting data through multiple sources and maintaining a research team of three researchers. Lastly,



confirmability strategies included reporting data using direct interview quotes as examples to display the relation to main concepts and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012 in Elo et al., 2014), an external auditor, and researcher reflexivity statements and journals.

## **Results**

This phenomenological investigation explored school counselors providing virtual services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants shared their first-hand experiences related to the relatively new world of virtual school counseling. The current study resulted in three themes, (a) lack of access to students, (b) forced adjustment, and (c) the challenge of addressing mental health complexities.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Access to Students: Feelings of Frustration and Loss**

Counselors described how their experience providing virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic was impacted by having limited access to students in the virtual setting. Many expressed that providing counseling services to a blank computer screen hindered the counseling relationship. According to the counselors, students would often keep their camera off and not respond to various methods of communication (i.e., emails, phones, messages, etc.). Despite counselors' attempts to connect with and access students virtually, often they felt their efforts were unsuccessful resulting in school counselors' frustration. Participants also explained the negative impact of not being able to physically visit a classroom to see a student, call a student down to their office, or check-in with students in the halls. They seemed to be grieving the loss of daily interactions with students. Some went on to express concern for students' mental/physical health and safety at home; since they could not physically see students, they were unsure if their needs were being met. The first theme, *lack of access to students: feelings of frustration and loss*, resulted in three subthemes, (a) hindering relationships: blank screens and

students not responding, (b) grieving spontaneous interactions, (c) having concern for students' well-being.

***Hindering Relationships: Blank Screens and Students Not Responding***

Participants shared that relationships with their students and students' families were negatively impacted by their lack of access, including providing services to blank computer screens and navigating new strategies for coordinating communication with students and families. One participant shared their challenge related to students keeping their cameras off,

It was really difficult to get them to turn their cameras on. So I had to learn a few tricks to get them to turn their cameras on. It was hard to know if I was just teaching to a blank screen or if they were actually children on the other end (P4).

Another participant stated,

But I think that a lot of students became disengaged because, even if you would meet with them, they wouldn't turn their screen on. it's like you were talking to this land out there, you don't know who's behind the screen. Some students, you couldn't see that, [and] that really made the job really hard (P5).

As a result of students not responding to communication efforts, one participant shared strategies for consulting with other school stakeholders,

And then... we share that [best method to contact student] around with all the other staff... They'll say, "Hey, have you ever been able to get Jessica to answer you in class?" And none of the teachers will say, or all the teachers will say, "No, I've never been able to get her to respond." And one teacher would be like, "Hey I called her one time, and she answered the phone." And they'd be like, "Oh, give me her number, I need to have her number, because I need to talk to her about this test" (P1).

Similarly, a participant explained their frustration accessing students virtually, and the communication gaps,

Lots of access issues. How do you get in contact with [students] after that 'cause a lot of them are not checking their email and they think email is like text messaging. If I could tell you the amount of emails I've gotten where the whole body of the email is in the subject (P2).

### ***Grieving Spontaneous Interactions***

In regards to providing virtual services, school counselors also described the lack of spontaneous interactions with students, such as check-ins in the hallways and having students unexpectedly stop into their offices. Many expressed feeling sadness and ultimately grieving the loss of these interactions. When describing missing students popping into their office, one school counselor expressed,

The kids weren't coming to you... Being in-person, God, I love it so much. You have kids just pop into your office. Virtually, we did not even have any sort of access to... [online school platform] add kids to our caseload. None of that was provided for us [during the pandemic]. It wasn't necessarily easy or simple for kids to come see us when they needed to (P2).

Another participant explained how he preferred to stop into classrooms, but no longer could due to the virtual setting. He stated,

I'm much more of an in-person social person... It was different... Even when I'm in school, I don't wanna call up to a room and say, "Hey, can you send a student down?". I'd rather...walk up a quick flight of steps, grab a student, see some people in the hallways... I don't like the disconnect that comes with the phone (P7).

One school counselor shared that the lack of spontaneous interactions felt unreal. She said,

A lot of it didn't feel real. I didn't have a kid in front of me crying- seeing cuts on their arm... I didn't have to get into an argument in person with a parent - because it was all through a computer or if it was texting, it didn't feel as real. So I didn't carry it home the same way that I usually would (P1).

Another participant described how the lack of physically seeing students on a daily basis resulted in less recognition of signs of potential abuse. The school counselor stated,

On the flip side of that, the limited access that I had to students early on, that's something we're still recovering from... When kids initially came back last school year, I did more CPS reports than I'd ever done in my entire career... I'm sure there are different theories on why that might be... We didn't have access [to students] for so long (P4).

### ***Having Concern for Students' Well-Being***

Due to school counselors' lack of access to students, they worried for students' well-being. For instance, multiple participants described going to students' homes to check on them. One school counselor stated, "and sometimes I'd have to do home visits, because then I'd have to go and be like, 'Hey you haven't logged in in two weeks. You okay in there? Is your mom home? Can we talk?'" (P1). Similarly, another described their concern for students' safety,

I wasn't going to be aware of their safety issues. Are they getting taken care of?... What their home life is like?... We help them focus on school while they're here... How are they going to compartmentalize when they're at home? Because they're having all of that at one time. I know how I was feeling at home, I can only imagine how some of these kids were feeling (P3).

Another participant expressed panic and worry regarding student well-being by saying, "I was a

little panicked [about not seeing students in person] because... Once again, you're... worried when you can't see kids, when you don't know where they are... or what they're doing” (P4).

Similarly, a participant described how they felt “awful” about not seeing students,

Awful - we want to connect with kids and we want to lay eyes on them and make sure that they're okay... You can tell so much by interacting with a kid and talking to them. And... we didn't have that... It was hard because it's like, “Where is this kid? Are they Okay?”... I've let their parent know, and so I know that I've done my due diligence, but [in] my counselor heart, is this kid really okay? (P9).

## **Theme 2: Forced Adjustment**

All participants described an adjustment period while providing virtual school counseling services. Some expressed feeling like their efforts were worthless or reactive, resulting in merely attempting to keep up with stakeholder immediate needs. Many explained their struggle with knowing how to navigate ethical practices, such as contacting students virtually, handling crisis, and confidentiality. Lastly, participants spoke about the adjustment to technology. This second theme, *forced adjustment*, resulted in three subthemes, (a) facilitating reactive practices and feelings of failure, (b) maneuvering ethical concerns, (c) navigating new technology.

### ***Facilitating Reactive Practices and Feelings Of Failure***

As the Covid-19 pandemic forced school counselors to provide virtual services, participants described providing services reactively. Despite attempting to keep up with stakeholder needs, their efforts often resulted in feelings of failure. When asked about their experiences providing virtual school counseling services, one participant expressed, “constantly makes it feel like you're just spinning your wheels and not getting anywhere and not making a

difference and not doing any good” (P1). Similarly, another participant stated, “I felt pretty worthless... It was just more running around... I felt like I just wasn't doing anything.” (P8).

Participants also described how their preparation and training for providing virtual school counseling services impacted their experience,

Nobody gave us classes on how to do that [virtual school counseling] and what are the best techniques... A lot of it was just learning as we go... The teachers were the ones that were focused on getting online and doing it quickly, so teachers were the forefront. I completely understand that, but counseling and other... resource classes... they were pushed to the back burner, like, “We'll do you guys later, but we gotta get our teachers set first,”... And there was training on different online and virtual techniques, but it was almost like it was thrown at you so quickly you couldn't even process it all... and figure out... You would sit through this training, but you didn't have time then to figure out how to incorporate what you had just learned into doing it because you were expected to do it last week... It was a challenging time (P4).

Another participant described how their daily tasks became challenging while providing virtual school counseling services,

I still have grades to do. You're getting with a hundred teachers who aren't in school [chuckle]... They don't submit their grades on time when we're here, your typical responsibilities didn't go away, they just became much harder to manage. Enrollments, that was weird. Just your daily tasks. Getting records... when they're like, “Well, I don't know what to do, this student's trying to enroll, the school's not in session where they're coming from, the parents are military, they don't have their stuff yet.” It was crisis management pretty much (P3).

A different participant described how it felt like her efforts were not enough,

I would always ask my director, “What do I need to do?... I feel like I'm not doing enough or I still don't know what I'm doing.” She would tell me, “This is new for all of us. We're all on the same page. We're all still trying to figure it out.” Which was comforting on my end (P10).

### ***Maneuvering Ethical Concerns***

Providing virtual school counseling services resulted in school counselors having to maneuver through various ethical concerns. Participants expressed how the lack of physical access to students along with virtually communicating with parents/guardians posed unique challenges and concerns. For example, when speaking about confidentiality and parents overhearing group counseling sessions, one participant explained, “if your parent might know my parent, and so, if you say something, and my parent hears that, my parent might say something to your parent... the confidentiality pieces... [are] so murky when it comes to virtual” (P9).

In the same regard, another participant shared the challenges related to attempting to increase student engagement through virtual school counseling services while being mindful of confidentiality,

There was no connection... I had kids in their beds... I'm always talking, I would ask them to “Get up out of bed and get out of your room... Let's move around.” Sometimes that wasn't always the best thing because there were many other people in the house (P6).

Another participant expressed ethical concerns surrounding documenting stakeholder interactions and managing students in crisis,

Being held accountable for...”What did you do to reach out to the student?”... I am trying

to stalk them [chuckle] and they're not showing up... the most...heart palpitating, frustrating thing, was trying to deal with crises online. Because it would be like you would get an email from a teacher talking about an assignment that they received in class two days ago that was concerning to them (P2).

Multiple school counselors were faced with handling student crises while providing virtual services. One participant explained,

I can look in their [students'] files and I can see where they've had suicidal thoughts in the past... But then I knew that they're [students] still going through it, they told me as much, but... how do you really check on a kid other than text them and how do you know if they're really okay?" (P1).

### *Navigating New Technology*

The virtual setting resulted in technological adjustments. One participant explained, I created a virtual office using Bitmojis and links that kids can do when they're stressed and anxious. I felt like I was throwing so much technology and so much stuff [at stakeholders]. I did a couple of workshops in regards to that...in March and April... of having to connect with kids and how to do that in a virtual environment (P6).

Another school counselor detailed adjusting to virtual classes and spoke about the lack of technological support,

All teachers had Zoom meetings... for each of their classes, if you needed to come to their class, you had to have the Zoom link for all the different classes... It was very difficult in that sense of the technology piece in trying to use that. [There] wasn't really a whole lot of support in that tech piece (P8).



On the contrary, a participant spoke about training offered by their district for faculty, staff, parents/guardians, and students. They expressed, “there was a lot of training on Zoom and etiquette, and all the settings... the communication with parents, and they also had... some type of video showing parents how to Zoom - a refresher. Same for the kids” (P10).

Another school counselor explained their experience helping students’ access technology, which resulted in time away from providing virtual school counseling services,

Initially after the closure in March of 2020, so right when we first closed unexpectedly... that was probably the most difficult time because there was very limited access to students. In [district], they did not all have access to technology, a lot of what I did in the beginning was contacting families and trying to get help. Make sure that they had the resources necessary to get online... and following up with the kids who the teachers were not seeing in class. I was not doing a whole lot of what I would consider counseling activities. In the beginning, I was not teaching lessons... online. I was not meeting individually with students... that was the hardest part (P4).

One participant shared that they enjoyed teaching their students how to use technology and seeing their students active on Zoom,

Sharing my screen and showing a video, it's cool you know? Teaching kids technology... Now we have third, fourth graders that are really good on a computer. They can zoom around on Zoom. It's awesome... that's been very helpful. Students were forced to... check their emails... so all of their information is right there. ...the whole thing of, “I lost my homework,” “I didn't know what to do” - that's not an excuse anymore (P7).

### **Theme 3: The Challenge of Addressing Mental Health Complexities**

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health needs heightened as stakeholders were

concerned with political, societal, and health stressors, on top of adjusting to virtual learning. School counselors spoke about addressing boundaries related to mental health needs. It was as if parents/guardians' needs increased when their students were virtual. Many participants described stakeholders expecting immediate responses. They went on to explain the challenges of work-home balance while providing virtual services. School counselors also spoke about challenges related to addressing stakeholder needs beyond Covid in the virtual setting. Some of the topics mentioned were physical health, loss, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Lastly, school counselors spoke about their own mental health while providing virtual services, which resulted in feelings of depression and guilt. The final theme, *the challenge of addressing mental health complexities*, contains three subthemes, (a) creating boundaries, (b) maintaining awareness of stakeholders' intersecting and multifaceted needs, and (c) struggling with their mental health.

### ***Creating Boundaries***

Participants described the challenges related to creating boundaries while providing virtual school counseling services. They spoke about wanting to address the mental health needs of stakeholders while maintaining a healthy work-home balance, which for many resulted in long hours and malleable boundaries. One participant described their experience as, “very frustrating... I would call families... at that time... everyone's mental health was kind of suffering... I was trying to work from home with two very little kids. I felt like... my time to do certain things was limited” (P9). Another participant explained,

The last thing is the boundaries of wanting, families wanting us to be accessible... 24/7 outside of traditional office hours, and feeling those blurred lines of feeling we needed to be providing services all the time” (P5).

Similarly, a school counselor shared,

Not having those boundaries between work and home... I don't have any downtime anymore... I used to have time to kind of recover from the emotional exhaustion of work, and I don't have that anymore. There is no break in between. I go straight from one to another.... there's no processing time, no transition time, and so... just in general that has been more challenging for me. These things weigh heavier on me. I take them home with me, I am emotionally tired. I do worry about these kids... there certainly has been an impact on me, I would say a negative one (P4).

Another participant expressed feeling worried and explained the ethical challenges related to addressing mental health complexities while creating boundaries,

But the students who I know, their home life was bad or just they're struggling or I'm worried about their mental state, my ethics just... It went out the window and I'm like, "Nope. Do I need to drive over there and I can talk to you from your driveway? Here's my cell phone number, do you need to text me?" But then we became on call 24/7. So that was hard too, because the working hours... were not... We were a mobile crisis unit... and that was hard 'cause like you're not gonna be able to... Turn that off. So from home, it's hard to do (P3).

### ***Maintaining Awareness of Stakeholders' Intersecting and Multifaceted Needs***

Multiple participants described their awareness that students were facing hardships related to the political and societal climate in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic. One participant shared, "Political... unrest and... I realized that people were dealing with lots of things... In very different ways... the teachers came in burnt out... We came in not okay or fully prepared and worried about our health and safety" (P2). Additionally, counselors expressed concern that their students' many needs went unmet, due to being virtual. One explained,

That's something that they would wanna go talk to the counselor about... 'My mom is sick with a disease', it's awful, right? That is I think the biggest situation of Covid-19 and everything along with it. The fear, the anxiety... Students were really afraid. Parents were reaching out to me and saying, "My kid doesn't wanna go outside at all even if it's just me and him walking down the street." That's a big thing. Another big situation is... in the middle of our virtual experience online, there were a lot of racial tensions... going on across [the] United States with the Black Lives Matter marches... I addressed that virtually, but that's another situation where I think a lot of our students were struggling and I wanted to help them... but I felt like it was tougher not being in-person and not being able to have that connection (P7).

Another participant shared how their experience providing virtual school counseling services was impacted by the Black Lives Matter movement and multigenerational households, My school is in [location], and it's majority Black and Latinx... We had students who have multi-generational homes, and a lot of fears with Covid.... We had students with a lot of loss, not just death to Covid, but other things (P8).

### ***Struggling With Their Mental Health***

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, school counselors spoke about the need to take care of themselves. As a result of providing virtual school counseling services, participants experienced severe burnout. For example, one participant shared,

It circles back to the guilt... everyone handles it different professionally... it was [the] guilt of wanting to do more or wanting to solve the problem... Every time I get an email or every time wanting it to be better for a student (P5).

Similarly, another participant stated,

Tending to other kids' mental health needs while trying to deal with my own... Being stuck at home with two little kids was insane... I'm trying to support other people and I'm like, I need support. "Who's supporting me?" ...kind of feeling that weight like, "oh my gosh these, these people are counting on me to take care of these things and... I'm struggling to take care of myself right now." So that was hard (P9).

One participant described their experience as a "professional crisis." They explained, "the end of the 19-20 school year when we all first went out during Covid, I was in a professional crisis of like how do I even be a counselor virtually?" (P1). Another described their mental health status as,

So personally, I had some issues... I would probably tell you that I went into a depression, that I think I was doing a lot of really good positive work for the [state] school counseling association about building relationships with kids through a virtual...society (P6).

Finally, a school counselor explained how they struggled providing virtual school counseling services and that they remained in their role for the students,

We were seeing all of these issues [racial and health inequities] as students were starting to return to school more, but there was just nothing you could do in the way the system was set up. It was like, "Oh, we still have to focus on academics." And we're like, "Our kids are losing their shit"... there's a lot of things going on right now'. It just fell on deaf ears, it seems like. It was just not how I'm used to being a counselor, and it was a huge struggle for me the entire year, to just mentally stay there... I only really stayed for the kids (P8).

## Discussion

In this phenomenological investigation of school counselors' experiences providing virtual school counseling services during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants provided rich, candid descriptions of their multidimensional experiences. Specifically, phenomenology was the qualitative approach used to expose participants' first-hand accounts of their common experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This section provides a detailed description of school counselors' shared experiences providing virtual school counseling services during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following themes will be discussed: (a) lack of access to students, (b) forced adjustment, and (c) the challenge of addressing mental health complexities.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Access to Students: Feelings of Frustration and Loss**

Literature suggests, "the helping relationship is the foundation on which the process of counseling and psychotherapy is based" (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016, p. 1). The results of this study underscore the crucial importance of relationships, within the counseling process. Similar to the findings of Savitz-Romer et al. (2021), in this study the lack of access to students in the virtual setting hindered the counseling relationship and ultimately the counseling process. Additionally, Dinkmeyer (1967) suggests, "the relationship necessary for counseling children is based upon mutual trust and mutual respect" (p. 201). Expanding on this, school counselors' interactions with students were sparse and limited by technology, causing participants a missed opportunity to build trusting relationships while providing virtual services.

When discussing spontaneous interactions, participants described missing students stopping by their offices, having unplanned interactions in the hallways, and stopping in classrooms to check on students. It was as if all virtual interactions had to be largely planned. Literature suggests the positive effects of check-in/check-out interventions and school counselors

being active in classrooms (Clark & Breman, 2009; Crone et al., 2004 in Hawken et al.). Due to the lack of access to students, school counselors were unable to utilize these described positive interventions and in result, grieved the loss of these interactions. Villares et al. (2022) indicated school counselors who provided less direct services to students experienced higher burnout rates than those who provided more direct services. Relatively, participants from the current study expressed burnout (e.g., poor mental health, feeling frustrated and worthless in their roles) due to lack of access to students, ultimately limited their ability to provide direct services.

Further, spontaneous interactions with students often result in informally assessing for physical signs of abuse and identifying mental and physical health concerns (i.e., seeing signs of physical abuse, malnourishment, hygiene and health concerns, etc.). The lack of spontaneous interactions directly relates to school counselors' concern for students' well-being in the virtual setting. Literature suggests that students in the virtual setting experience hardships beyond academic achievement, such as food insecurity, access to healthcare, and social isolation (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Martin & Sorensen, 2020). Additionally, school counselors lacked access to students leaving them uncertain of students' current mental and physical health status. One participant even explained that upon resuming in-person services, they experienced an influx in CPS reports, which echoes Baron et al.'s (2020) findings, though specific for a school counseling sample.

## **Theme 2: Forced Adjustment**

School counselors are separate from teachers, with distinct roles, standards, governing bodies, ethical codes, and so forth (ASCA, 2019a). Therefore, they require their own guidelines while providing virtual school counseling services. Unfortunately, during the Covid-19 pandemic, school counselors were left often on their own to figure out how to adjust and deliver

a virtual school counseling program. They described feeling as if their practices were reactive and a sense of failure - as if services were trial and error. Previous literature has described teacher and administrator roles providing virtual services during the Covid-19 pandemic (Borup et al., 2020); however, there is a lack of literature on school counselors' roles. This gap in the literature mirrors participants' experiences of reactive practices- that they were typically responding without content or knowledge for the virtual modality.

Given the nature of virtual school counseling, participants were tasked with navigating new technology. They described learning how to operate technology while also teaching stakeholders how to use technology. Also, in the current study, participants noted increased student engagement as one benefit of using technology. These findings reinforce literature which suggests a benefit of virtual learning is that students can take control of their learning environment, causing a decrease in social anxiety and increase in focus (Arizona State University Prep Digital, 2019). As of current, there is no research on the school counselors' role navigating technology or teaching stakeholders how to use technology while providing virtual school counseling services; as such, the present study addresses an important gap in the literature.

### **Theme 3: The Challenge of Addressing Mental Health Complexities**

School counselors faced multiple challenges while attempting to create boundaries within the virtual setting. Due to school closures, many were forced to work from home, which included caring for family members and being out of their office, while attempting to meet the evolving needs of their already complex jobs, including supporting stakeholders. The pandemic has had a profoundly negative impact on communities' economic status and physical health (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Students and families were faced with challenges related to food insecurity, health, and social isolation (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Martin &



Sorensen, 2020). In a similar vein, school counselors were tasked with addressing political stressors, societal distress, and racial inequities throughout the K-12 education system (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2020). Furthermore, Pincus et al. (2020) illustrated how school counselors are mental health professionals, making them critical in addressing the impacts of Covid-19 on the K-12 student population.

Covid-19 has brought about new student concerns related to health and safety (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Martin & Sorensen, 2020), social isolation (Hanover Research, 2020), family support (Bansak & Starr, 2021), and academics (Middleton, 2020), all which school counselors are required to address. Expanding on this previous research, participants in the present study communicated attempting to maintain boundaries while meeting the evolving and heightened needs of stakeholders and the greater society as a whole. Thus, the school counselors in the current investigation echoed the literature base, reinforcing the immense mental health needs in the greater society, as a result of the pandemic.

Overall, school counselors', who are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students in all K-12 settings (i.e., in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings) (ASCA, 2019a). The new territory of virtual school counseling, in combination with an increase in mental health needs meant some stakeholders had relatively instant access to school counselors through email, phone, and other electronic means of communication. Thus, school counselors described an increase in stakeholder needs while providing virtual school counseling services; this finding reiterates the importance of creating and maintaining boundaries in the virtual setting. School counselors' experiences setting boundaries while attempting to meet stakeholders' needs in the virtual school environment has yet to be explored; making our findings novel to the profession.

### **Limitations**

Although phenomenological research and individual interviews can provide rich information, there are a few limitations to consider. In following trustworthiness strategies listed previously, the researcher bracketed assumptions and biases through reflexive journaling and memos after each interview, coding session, and coding meeting. At the same time, in alignment with my philosophical underpinnings/theoretical lens, a researcher can never fully remove their biases and assumptions, which will impact the study to some degree. Additionally, although interviews can generate valuable content, this study could be strengthened by using multiple types of data, to bolster trustworthiness by and seeing patterns across multiple types of data (e.g., focus group interview, observations, participant journal, etc.). In the future, the addition of focus groups could capture conversations and interactions between participants (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Implications for Future Research**

Implications informed by this study's findings include determining ways to access stakeholders, planning for potential future unforeseen adjustments from in-person to virtual school counseling services (similar to crisis response planning), and determining ways to address mental health complexities in the virtual school counseling setting. It is recommended that these three considerations should be the foundation for developing virtual school counseling practices, preparation, and policies.

### **Implications for Practice**

It is important to note that the following implications for practice are intended to be malleable and adaptable based on resources available and unique stakeholder needs. Based on our findings, the following implications for practice have been identified: (a) maintain updated student/family/emergency contact information, (b) create a virtual school counseling office with

office hours, (c) communicate with teachers on how to request students from class, (d) utilize text message applications or school issued cell phone, and (e) address the mental health of students and school counselors.

In the current study, school counselors' expressed that a lack of access to students significantly impacted their ability to provide virtual school counseling services. Thus, schools must ensure student, families', and emergency contact information be updated frequently throughout the school year. Counselors can establish a virtual school counseling office to increase accessibility. Students could then spontaneously seek virtual services as needed and stakeholders would be aware of virtual office hours, resulting in boundary setting. Additionally, teachers can provide students with the virtual school counseling office link when they are requested from class by the counselor. Participants also described not wanting stakeholders to have their personal phone numbers due to lack of boundaries and work-life balance; however, there was no alternative at the time. These findings highlight the need for text messaging applications or the issue of school issued cell phones for school counselors who are providing virtual school counseling services- which would also reinforce/establish boundaries (i.e., set automated out of office message with information to emergency services) and address confidentiality concerns (i.e., locked or secure platform solely for school counseling communication).

Lastly, as discussed throughout our study, the mental health of students and school counselors must be addressed. Mirroring in person practices, counselors can provide virtual classroom lessons on coping skills specific to virtual schooling (i.e., social isolation, anxiety, depression), host virtual small groups, and conduct individual virtual counseling sessions. Our study exposed the negative impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on school counselors' mental

health while providing virtual school counseling services. School counselors must set boundaries with stakeholders to avoid working outside of work hours. School counselors' schedules are and caseloads are full; however, practices to take care of their own mental health must be a top priority in order for them to best serve students. In summary, there are various virtual school counseling practices available for counselors to adopt. The five described above are a platform for additional, more specialized practices.

### **Implications for Preparation**

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the need for school counselor education/preparation programs to prepare counselors for providing virtual school counseling services. The findings from our study indicate the need for training related to accessing students, planning for the transition from in-person to virtual counseling, and addressing mental health concerns in the virtual setting. The following implications for preparation have been suggested based on this study's findings: (a) virtual school counseling practices, (b) virtual school counseling ethics, (c) opportunities for virtual collaboration, and (d) advocacy in the virtual school environment.

The current study highlighted the need for training regarding practices specific to virtual school counseling. Fortunately, school counseling in person practices can serve as a framework for virtual practices; however, the access to students and other stakeholders is drastically different. Therefore, we recommend teaching school counselors how to implement strategies to increase access to students and stakeholder in order to provide virtual services. For example, school counselors in training can learn ways to set up a virtual school counseling office. They can also learn how to utilize various virtual techniques to increase student engagement such as free online games (i.e., Kahoot), making students editors of shared documents and asking them to contribute to lessons by editing/adding to documents (i.e., creating Google Slides, Google Jam

Board, etc.), and using the whiteboard feature on Zoom.

Our study also highlighted the need for and access to virtual school counseling ethical standards and practices. Some school counselors were unaware of ethics pertaining to accessing students, confidentiality, and handling crises. Others expressed not knowing where to access information pertaining to ethics while providing virtual school counseling services. It is recommended that school counselor educators and trainers incorporate ethics specific to virtual counseling in their curricula. The current study also highlighted the need for education on virtual collaboration opportunities, along with various ways for school counselors to collaborate with stakeholders while providing virtual school counseling services. Findings indicate counselor educators and trainers can discuss the benefits of virtual collaboration such as: (a) identifying access to students, (b) student needs, and (c) resources beyond the school building. Lastly, counselor educators and trainers should teach about ways to advocate for their role and students within the virtual school environment.

### **Implications for Policy**

Our study also exposed the need for the establishment of policies related to virtual school counseling services. (a) communicating with stakeholders, (b) crisis response, and (c) virtual counseling duties/expectations. It is important to note that policies should vary and evolve based on student needs and available resources. Participants described challenges communicating with stakeholders related to access and boundaries. Thus, schools and districts should develop policies on how school counselors should communicate with stakeholders (i.e., phone call or text from school issued phone, email, school platform, etc.). Policies should also include standard communication hours and how to direct stakeholders after hours through an automated messaging and answering system.

The need for specific virtual school counseling crisis response guidelines, considerations, and standards was also highlighted throughout our study. These policies should be or already have been established by professional school counseling associations and school districts. Districts should distribute existing information on crisis response to all school counselors and not assume all counselors are members of professional organizations. As previously mentioned, school counselors are responsible for providing academic, career, and social/emotional support to all students in all K-12 settings (i.e., in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings) (ASCA, 2019a). Therefore, the duties and expectations of school counselors should be similar regardless of the setting.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Covid-19 is a virus which first took the world by surprise, beginning in 2019-2020. The impact of this relatively new phenomenon has yet to be deeply explored in many facets, and especially within the world of school counseling. This study is a catalyst for more specialized future research. For example, future studies could focus on school counselors meeting the needs of specific student groups (i.e., LGBTQ+, students receiving special education services or gifted services, grade levels, etc.). As future studies are conducted, researchers can focus their intentions on diving deeper into the role of the school counselor during Covid-19 (i.e., working with families, providing community support, collaborating with colleagues, returning to the school building, hybrid services, etc.), to expose more specific information. Such studies could be both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of U.S. school counselors providing virtual services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. A nation-wide perspective is beneficial to generalize how the federal education system could better support and prepare

school counselors going virtual during uncertain times. As mentioned, future specialized research (i.e., student population, location, grade-level, etc.) surrounding the experiences of school counselors during Covid-19 could better inform national school counseling practices (such as ASCA recommendations), professional development efforts, school counselor education curricula, and CACREP standards.

Since this study's results are unique to the experiences in the U.S., it is recommended that future research take place in other geographical locations to best represent all school counselors' experiences and the phenomena of Covid-19. It would be beneficial to conduct similar studies across various states, regions, and countries to inform local practices, policies, and procedures. It is also important to keep in mind that multiple changes in state and local education policies during Covid-19 may impact participant experiences; therefore, each experience is unique to the rules, regulations, and policies related to their virtual requirements.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Recruitment Email (Example)

Dear Potential Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. I am under the supervision of Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott, an associate professor at ODU. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during Covid-19. Your participation in this study could inform school counseling practices, professional development efforts, and school counselor preparation programs. Participation is voluntary, participants may withdraw at any time, and there is no compensation.

**Eligibility:** To be considered as a participant, you must meet the following criteria:

(a) have been/were employed as a school counselor by a U.S. public school for at least one academic year since 2019 and (b) have provided virtual school counseling services [e.g., email, video, phone, etc. w/ students, families, staff, etc.] at some point throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Time:** The total maximum amount of time it will take to participate in this study is 1 hour and 45 minutes (15 minutes to complete the onboarding process [informed consent, Google Form, email], 60 minutes to engage in the interview, 15-30 minutes to check the interview transcript).

**Participation Requirements:** You will be asked to complete the following:

1. Read, sign, and return the attached consent form via email to [awort001@odu.edu](mailto:awort001@odu.edu).
2. Complete the Google demographic form: [insert link]
3. Complete a 1-hour individual interview in late fall 2021 or early spring 2022 via Zoom (time and date based on availability) where you will be asked a series of semi-structured questions pertaining to your experience as a school counselor providing virtual services during Covid-19. The interview will be audio and video recorded, and transcribed.
4. Review the interview transcript for accuracy.

**Confidentiality:** To best protect your identity, your name, school, and district name will not be displayed on the final report, instead pseudonyms will be used. All audio and video recordings will be destroyed immediately upon study completion, and all transcriptions and Google Forms will be destroyed after five years. Participants will be asked to review their interview transcript to ensure accuracy and promote data trustworthiness through member checking. Please see attached informed consent for full confidentiality disclosure.

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Please let me know if you have any questions about the study or your participation. I can be reached via email at [awort001@odu.edu](mailto:awort001@odu.edu) or phone 845-283-1825. Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,  
Allison Worth



## Appendix B

### Consent Agreement for Research Study Involving Human Subjects

**Title:** The experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during Covid-19: A phenomenological investigation

**Investigators:**

Emily Goodman-Scott

[egscott@odu.edu](mailto:egscott@odu.edu)

757-683-3326

Allison Worth

[awort001@odu.edu](mailto:awort001@odu.edu)

845-283-1825

**Description**

School counselors are invited to participate in this study exploring the experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during Covid-19. The following research focus guides this study: Exploring the experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during Covid-19. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the first-hand experiences of school counseling professionals' and the support they receive, need, and lack while providing virtual school counseling services due to Covid-19 related school closures.

This study includes a brief screening survey to determine participation eligibility, demographics, and availability, which should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. In the future, an individual interview will take place over Zoom, a web-based conference system, which should take approximately 60-minutes. Lastly, participants will be emailed a copy of the interview transcript to review for accuracy, which should take approximately 15-30 minutes. Overall, the approximate time it should take to participate in this study is a maximum total of 1 hour and 45 minutes. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential.

**The criteria for inclusion in this study includes: (a) adults who self-identify as a professional school counselor, having held the position in a VA public school consecutively since at least 2019 and (b) currently employed as a school counselor in a VA public school.**

All participants selected for qualitative interviews will be given informed consent information prior to the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher will verbally confirm that the participant received and fully understands the informed consent, will review confidentiality, and answer any questions. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may opt out of the interview at any time.

**Researcher Risks:**

Data collection will occur via Zoom, a web-based video conference platform. The researcher conducting the interview will remain in a confidential setting; however, they cannot control for participants' settings. Therefore, participants are responsible for the confidentiality of their own

setting during the interview. As far as researchers can anticipate, there are no social, legal, emotional, mental, or physical risks from participating in this study.

**Research Benefits:**

Participants may benefit from reflecting on their experiences going virtual during Covid-19. This may assist with recognizing their strengths as a school counselor during Covid-19, this increasing self-awareness surrounding their school counseling practices and student needs.

**Special Populations:**

N/A

**Time, Commitment, and Payment:**

Approximately 15 minutes for the Google Form (eligibility, demographics, and availability), 60 minutes for the interview, and 15-30 minutes for the transcript review. There is no penalty for participating in this study and there is no compensation.

**Safeguarding the Identity of Participants:**

The researchers are taking steps to ensure participant responses are anonymous. All information obtained about participants is confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Only the researchers conducting the study and the transcriptionist will have access to the raw survey data. Participants' identifying information (e.g., participant names, district names, etc.) will be removed from transcripts, to protect their identities, and pseudonyms will be assigned. The anonymous data will be kept on researchers' password protected accounts (Google and Zoom). The anonymous results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications.

**Permission to Audio and Video Record:**

During participation in this research study, participants will be audio and video recorded. By completing the Google Form and noting your agreement with the consent, participants are giving researchers permission to use the transcripts for additional purposes of publication beyond the immediate needs of data transcription for this study. All audio and video recordings will be destroyed immediately upon study completion, and all transcriptions and Google Forms will be destroyed after five years. Participants will be asked to review their interview transcript to ensure accuracy and promote data trustworthiness through member checking.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Participation in voluntary and participants may opt out of the study at any time. They may choose to not answer interview questions. To participate in this study, audio recording is required. Video recording is not required; however, it is suggested.

**IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed and approved by The Old Dominion University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott  
Counseling and Human Services  
New Education Building  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA 23529  
757-683-7142  
[egscott@odu.edu](mailto:egscott@odu.edu)

**Investigator:**

Allison Worth  
Counseling and Human Services  
New Education Building  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA 23529  
845-283-1825  
[Awort001@odu.edu](mailto:Awort001@odu.edu)

**ODU DCEPS IRB Chair:**

Dr. John Baaki  
STEM Education and Professional Studies  
New Education Building  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA 23529  
757-683-5491  
[jbaaki@odu.edu](mailto:jbaaki@odu.edu)

**Statement of Consent:**

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason. In addition, you acknowledge that by completing the online demographic survey and interview, you agree to participate in the study as described above.

Yes, I agree to participate

No, I decline to participate

**Appendix C**  
**Google Form Online Demographic Survey**

**Description and Consent (included at the start of the Qualtrics Survey)**

See consent form: Appendix A

**Name:** First and last

**Email Address:**

**Please check which of the following are true about you:**

I am currently employed as a school counseling by a Virginia public school

I have been employed as a school counselor consecutively since at least 2019

**How many years have you been employed by your current school?**

**How many years have you been employed as a school counselor?**

**School Name:**

**District Name:**

**Please select the grade level you were responsible for providing school counseling services to during the corresponding school years:**

2019-2020 school year:

Elementary

Middle

High

All grade levels (K-12)

2020-2021 school year:

Elementary

Middle

High

All grade levels (K-12)

2021-2022 school year:

Elementary

Middle

High

All grade levels (K-12)

**Please check the gender you identify with:** Female, male, non-binary, pangender, agender, other, prefer not to answer

**Please check your age range:**

18-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61 and above

**Please check the race you identify with (check all that apply):**

Hispanic or Latin/a/x            Asian            American Indian or Alaskan Native  
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander            Black or African American            White  
Mixed Races            Prefer not to Answer            Other:

### **Availability**

The next section includes questions about your availability for a 60-minute individual interview via Zoom (a web-based video conferencing platform).

**Please mark the following dates/times that you are available to participate in a 60 minute interview (check all that times you are available):**

- Insert
- Insert
- Insert

### **Final Message**

Thank you for taking part in this survey! We will be in touch within the next few weeks to finalize participation in an individual interview.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott (egscott@odu.edu)  
Allison Worth (awort001@odu.edu)

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol and Questions

Interviewer Name:

Participant's pseudonym:

Interview Date:

Interview Time:

Interview Setting (Zoom audio, video, both?):

Interviewer completed memo and reflexive journal:

Date of interview transcription:

Transcription member checking for accuracy and to expand on points as desired?

Date(s) transcription sent to participant and participant confirmation?

Follow up questions needed for subsequent interview?

All public record demographic information gathered?

### Interview Protocol

**Opening script:** Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview about your experience as a school counselor going virtual during Covid-19.

Before we get started, I would like to confirm that you had a chance to read the informed consent document I gave you, to see if you have any questions (field participant questions).

This interview should last about 60 minutes and be conducted once. Our interview today is audio and video recorded, and transcribed via Zoom, and it will be kept confidential between us and the study investigator(s) (e.g., Allison Worth and Emily Goodman-Scott). Here is my contact information [insert interviewer's contact information] in case there is anything you would like to follow-up about. The interview is semi-structured and unstructured. Although I have prepared 7 questions and 2 talking points, I do not anticipate we will cover all the information. This is okay, I want us to feel free to have a conversation if the interview takes us in that direction. I will ask questions and at times, ask follow-up questions to your responses.

Before I begin recording, do you have any questions?

## Qualitative Interview

### **Semi-structured interview questions:**

1. What have you experienced in terms of providing virtual school counseling services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience while providing virtual school counseling services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. If you are willing to share any artifacts (i.e., classroom lesson plans, small group plans, forms sent to parents/caregivers, etc.) related to providing school counseling services during Covid-19, would you mind sharing them with me via email at awort001@odu.edu?

### **Other open-ended sub-questions/probing follow-up questions that may also be asked:**

4. What was your initial transition from in-person school counseling services to virtual services like?
5. What has your virtual access to students and families been like throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?
6. What training and support did you receive while providing virtual school counseling services throughout Covid-19 (probes could include asking specifically about district support, professional association support, grad prep program support)?
7. What advice would you give stakeholders (such as, administrators, district leaders, counselor educators, and/or state/federal representatives) regarding virtual school counseling during Covid-19?
8. Have there been any benefits that you have experienced while providing virtual school counseling services during Covid-19 (if yes, please describe)?

Thank you again for helping us to better understand your experiences as a school counselor providing virtual services during Covid-19. The interview will be transcribed over the next several weeks and we will email it back to you to see if you would like to change, clarify, or add any information. I will also follow-up regarding any artifacts (i.e., classroom lesson plans, small group plans, forms sent to parents/caregivers, etc.) you would like to send related to providing virtual school counseling services during Covid-19. Also, if we have any additional questions at a later time would you be willing to have brief meeting?

Turn off recording device.

## Appendix E

### IRB Approval Letter



#### OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH



**Physical Address**

4111 Monarch Way, Suite 203  
Norfolk, Virginia 23508

**Mailing Address**

Office of Research  
1 Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia 23529  
Phone(757) 683-3460  
Fax(757) 683-5902

DATE: November 22, 2021

TO: Emily Goodman-Scott, PhD

FROM: Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee

PROJECT TITLE: [1812938-1] The experiences of school counselors providing virtual services during Covid-19: A phenomenological investigation

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE:

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact John Baaki at (757) 683-5491 or [jbaaki@odu.edu](mailto:jbaaki@odu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee's records.



**VITA****ALLISON KATHRYN WORTH**

Old Dominion University  
Department of Counseling and Human Services  
1226 W 43rd St Norfolk, VA 23508

**EDUCATION**

<b>Ph.D. in Education, Concentration in Counseling</b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA	May 2022
<b>M.S.Ed in School Counseling</b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA	May 2019
<b>B.S. in Business Management</b> State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY	August 2015