Contributions to Professional School Counselors Entering and Remaining in the Profession: A Grounded Theory

Kathryn Babb
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CONTRIBUTIONS TO SELECTING THE SCHOOL COUNSELING PROFESSION AND SUPPORTS LEADING TO RETENTION: A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

by

KATHRYN E. BABB
B. S. University of Idaho, 2007
M. A. Gonzaga University, 2013

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Counselor Education and School Psychology in the College of Community Innovation and Education at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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Major Professor: Viki Kelchner
ABSTRACT

As the mental health needs of children and adolescents have reached a crisis level, the need for trained mental health professionals in the field is as important as ever. However, many states are currently experiencing a shortage of educators, including school counselors. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the factors that contribute to school counselors selecting their career, as well as understanding what elements lead to the retention of professional school counselors. As there are no existing theories related to understanding the career choice of professional school counselors, nor pertaining to the supports leading to the retention of school counselors, a constructivist grounded theory methodology was employed for this study. School counselors in the State of Florida with 3 – 5 years of professional experience were interviewed. In total, 21 individuals were interviewed at least once, and five participants participated in a follow-up conversation. Utilizing an iterative approach to analysis, a single coder completed open, focused, and axial coding. The emerging codes resulted in two theories: (a) Contributions to School Counselor Career Theory (CSCCT), and (b) Retention of School Counselors Theory (RSCT). The findings of the study are relevant for counselor education programs, school districts, and counselor education research.

Keywords: school counseling, school counselor, retention, grounded theory, career exploration
To my Mom.

You were right; girls can do anything.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### LIST OF ACRONYMS (or) ABBREVIATIONS

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<tr>
<td>AAP</td>
<td>American Academy of Pediatrics</td>
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<td>APA</td>
<td>American Psychological Association</td>
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<td>ASCA</td>
<td>American School Counselor Association</td>
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<td>CDC</td>
<td>Center for Disease Control and Prevention</td>
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<td>CACREP</td>
<td>Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAMI</td>
<td>National Alliance on Mental Illness</td>
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<td>NCES</td>
<td>National Center for Education Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDEA</td>
<td>National Defense Education Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>OOH</td>
<td>Occupational Outlook Handbook</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Professional Learning Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSCC</td>
<td>Preliminary school counselor credential</td>
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<td>UCF</td>
<td>University of Central Florida</td>
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

School counselors hold unique professional skill sets, allowing for holistic support and advocacy for all students (Ohrt et al., 2016). School counselors can provide expert knowledge in topics such as mental health awareness, academic planning and success, post-secondary options, decision-making, and addressing social and societal issues (He et al., 2021). School counseling’s ecological perspective includes understanding and integrating the social and community contexts that impact a student’s ability to achieve (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; McMahon et al., 2014). With this holistic mindset, school counselors can advocate for educational and environmental conditions that allow students to find the greatest level of success and maximize their potential (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014).

In a 2016 study, Ohrt and colleagues identified eight themes that high school students indicated were areas of support from their professional school counselors. Academic, personal/social, post-secondary, and advocacy were all themes that emerged in the study (Ohrt et al., 2016). Similar themes were identified in a study with elementary school students, emphasizing personal and social development (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). Elementary school counselors contribute most heavily to student and campus success via close collaboration with teachers, administration, and school staff (Rayle & Adams, 2008). Students who worked with a school counselor were more likely to attend a 2- or 4-year post-secondary institution over not continuing their post-secondary educational journey (Belasco, 2013). Further, the success of students from diverse backgrounds depended more on engagement with a school counselor than their white peers (Jeong Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). While addressing academic and post-secondary needs is a crucial component of the profession, school counselors
also function as mental health experts, serving students, families, and communities (American School Counselor Association; ASCA, 2019a).

**Statement of the Problem**

In 2020, more than 50 million students were enrolled in the public education system, grades prekindergarten through grade 12 (NCES; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, during the 2021-2022 school year, only 14% of school districts reported meeting the American School Counselor Association's school counselor-to-student ratio of 250:1 (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). No school districts in Hawaii, Florida, and the District of Columbia employ enough counselors to adhere to the recommended ratio (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). While most school counselors already face the hardship of large caseloads, this challenge will continue to grow (ASCA, 2021) as the profession faces this significant shortage.

In a 2021 poll conducted by Iposo on behalf of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 87% of students’ caregivers indicated they support mental health education in the school system. While it is encouraging that caregivers support mental health services, school counselors are often the only trained mental health professionals in a school setting (Lambie et al., 2019). The multifaceted skill set of school counselors is more imperative than ever as the mental health needs of children and adolescents continue to rise (Lambie et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018; Ohrt et al., 2016).

Mental illness in children and adolescents was only compounded with the onset of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic (Hillis et al., 2021). The response to COVID-19 saw children suffering from physical isolation, separation anxiety, and loneliness (Hillis et al., 2021). Further,
20% of caregivers responded that their child felt anxious during the pandemic, 14% felt sad, and 12% reported that their child was isolating (NAMI, 2021). Moreover, it has been suggested that children with depression and anxiety show increased symptomatology (Dvorsky et al., 2020). The impact of COVID-19 is so significant that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP; 2021) has declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. Therefore, there is a greater need than ever to have an appropriate number of school counselors available to support students and families.

**Purpose of the Study**

Although existing research studies address the inadequate number of school counselors on staff and the profession's challenges, little analytic focus has been placed on understanding the factors impacting the recruitment and retention of school counselors. In response to the literature gap, this study aimed to explore the personal and professional influences that lead school counselors to select the profession and the supports impacting the decision to remain in the profession beyond three years. By analyzing data collected via interviews, a theory was developed related to factors that contribute to school counselors entering the profession. A second theory was developed regarding the supports contributing to the retention of professional school counselors for at least three years.

**Research Questions**

Two research questions guide the present study:

1. What factors contributed to professional school counselors selecting their career?
2. During the first 3-5 years of their career, what supports have professional school counselors experienced that contributed to remaining in the profession?

**Design of the Study**

Qualitative methodology was used for this study. Specifically, constructivist grounded theory design was used to develop a theory regarding the influences of school counselors in selecting their profession and a second theory regarding the supports that lead to retention. Professional school counselors were interviewed via telephone and recorded with a portable voice recorder. Each participant was interviewed at least once, with five participants completing a follow-up conversation. Additionally, memo writing occurred throughout the study. The semi-structured interview dialogue primarily focused on the factors for selecting the profession, support received during their professional career, and reasons for staying in the position. Transcripts were analyzed and grouped into recurring ideas creating themes. A positionality statement, ongoing reflexivity, and peer debriefing were used in the bracketing process to identify personal bias. Additionally, fidelity checks with dissertation committee members occurred while completing interviews, throughout the data analysis process, and while writing the findings. In completing these exercises, the potential for researcher bias was decreased, and transparency and trustworthiness of the study design and results increased.

**Assumptions of the Study**

For this study, two assumptions about the participants and data were made. As proof of years of professional service was not requested, one assumption of the study was that the
participants were truthful in their report of study eligibility. The second assumption of the study was that the personal information shared in the interviews was indeed authentic.

**Organization of the Study**

Organized into five chapters, this dissertation will inform the reader of existing literature, methodological approach, findings, and exploration of implications and limitations. Relevant existing literature will be presented in chapter two. Specifically, scholarship on the history of school counseling, roles of school counselors, the growing professional demands on school counselors, retention, and career motivations will be covered. Chapter three outlines the methodological approach of the study. The purpose of the study, research design, participant recruitment and eligibility criteria, data analysis, and trustworthiness are discussed. The findings of the study are described in chapter four, including participant biosketches, presentation of developmental theories, and exemplar examples of data representing the theories. Finally, chapter five will provide a discussion of the study and findings. Implications of the study, limitations of the research, and suggestions for further exploration will be included. A personal reflection on the study is also found in chapter five.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on multiple topics related to school counseling was reviewed. Specifically, topics on the history of school counseling training programs, the impact of school counselors on students and school climate, current challenges facing school counselors, and responses to the lack of school counselors were all explored. While literature is abundant on the challenges experienced by school counselors and professional retention, little research provides a strengths-based approach to understanding what elements contribute to school counselors remaining in the profession. As such, this literature review will provide the framework for which the study was built.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review strategy for this study included searching for critical terms related to school counseling literature. First, databases were selected to begin the initial search, including but not limited to the University of Central Florida (UCF) Libraries Catalog, ERIC, ProQuest, Education Source, and Teacher Reference Source. Next, Boolean searches, including keywords such as school counselors or school counseling, school counselor retention, the impact of school counselors, and the role of school counselors, were used to search full-text, scholarly journals, and books. Additionally, the function cited by offered by Google Scholar was utilized, as well as direct searches of prolific school counseling researchers such as Borders, Dollarhide, Erford, Lambie, Mullen, Scarborough, and Whiston.
Introduction to the Literature

For more than 100 years, school counselors have been an integral part of a school's support system (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). School counselors interact with students, families, administration, and school staff via individual counseling, small group work, classroom engagement, professional collaboration, family partnerships, and stakeholder engagement (ASCA; American School Counselor Association, 2019). Experts in attending to the unique demands of children and adolescents, school counselors are prepared to address areas including academic success, social/emotional support, and serving as mental health experts, making the profession vital to the success of children and adolescents (Lambie et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has tremendously impacted the previously strained school system (Akif Karaman et al., 2021). The prolonged closure of in-person schooling and the transition to online platforms has increased the negative impacts of the crisis around the world (Akif Karaman et al., 2021; Ozer, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Specifically, social and physical isolation has increased psychological distress among adolescents, including anxiety and fear (Ozer, 2020). Anxiety has led to worries about becoming ill, loss of income, prolonged isolation, and delays in academic advancement. Adding to these challenges are those associated with overexposure to harmful content on social media, which has contributed to the mental health decline among students (Cao et al., 2020; Güngör et al., 2020; Kernan, 2019). Stress regarding the lack of services received at school, such as nutrition services, health care, and academic and mental health services, has impacted the overall well-being of children and adolescents (Akif Karaman et al., 2021).
The educational system’s role is to provide an opportunity for students to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally, leading to a higher quality of life (Akif Karaman et al., 2021). As the needs of school systems become increasingly demanding, well-trained school counselors must enter the field (Havlik et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Udwin and colleagues (2000), students who received psychological support following a crisis such as an epidemic could solve problems and adapt to new routines of daily life more easily. Thus, the need for professional counselors is even higher following a crisis like an epidemic or natural disaster (Akif Karaman et al., 2021).

As COVID-19 drastically changed how communities, families, and educational systems function, this is a critical time for school counselors to be strong advocates and leaders on school campuses (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). However, there is currently a severe shortage of professional school counselors, and the field is ill-prepared to meet the increasing demands of stakeholders (ASCA, 2022). While many challenges face professional school counselors, the climate is conducive to exploring the profession’s positive aspects.

**History of School Counseling**

**Early History**

School counseling has continuously evolved since its inception in the early 1900s (Baker, 2001; Whiston, 2002). Frank Parsons is considered the first to offer career and vocational guidance and the first to offer career and vocational guidance (Jones, 1994). His vision for vocational training developed from his own experiences, including suffering from poverty, unemployment, and illness (Meara et al., 1995; Zytowski, 2001). A man with a firm conviction
and vision for better societal opportunities for others, Parsons integrated his moral compass, personal experiences, and desires for improvement to guide career development and exploration (Jones, 1994; Zytowski, 2001). His contributions include the development of the Vocation Bureau of Boston and the establishment of vocational counseling guides to assist counselors in their work with clients (O’Brien, 2001).

The most notable guide developed by Parsons was Choosing a Vocation, which Parsons started before his death in 1908 (Jones, 1994; O’Brien, 2001). As a result of the commitment of Parsons’ literary executor, Ralph Albertson, the guide was published in 1909 and continues to be the cornerstone of vocational counseling today (Zytowski, 2001). Parsons developed the guide using individual personality types and characteristics to underpin decision-making, establishing the foundation for school counselors and career counselors (Jones, 1994; Meara et al., 1995; Zytowski, 2001). Most of the principles Parsons espoused continue to be used today in career and vocational counseling (Jones, 1994). Ten guiding principles, including the importance of guided self-analysis, commitment to personal and vocational exploration by writing a plan down on paper, and the need for vocational counselors to be frank yet kind, are prevalent in vocational and counseling frameworks (Meara et al., 1995).

While Parsons is considered the father of vocational guidance, Jesse B. Davis is recognized as the first school counselor (Pope, 2009). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Davis integrated systematic vocational guidance into his work with students at Central High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Davis, 1912; Pope, 2009). Similarly to Parsons, Davis was inspired by his experiences and dedication to community and democracy (Pope, 2009). Davis was committed to free public schools, equal education for women, and eliminating racial inequities. His first job
as an educator was as a classroom teacher, eventually moving into school administration. As the eleventh-grade principal, Davis developed the skills and competencies necessary to develop the school counselor’s role (Davis, 1956). As noted by Davis (1956), students viewed working with him, whom they referred to as Uncle J. B., as an opportunity for help, setting the tone for the role of school counselors as advocates, not disciplinaries.

The 1930s brought the first significant shift to the school counseling profession (Shear, 1965). As a result of expanding duties and demands for training, a new organizational structure called pupil personnel services emerged (Shear, 1965; Whiston, 2002). A formal list guides responsibilities and assignments in the pupil personnel services structure, focusing on supporting students’ unique needs (Shear, 1965). As the pupil personnel services profession continued to grow, the onset of World War II in the 1940s propelled the profession into increasing change (Schmidt, 2008). Counseling in schools began emerging as an important social factor, primarily responding to the war effort. A focus on school services’ critical role was brought forth by the need for vocational training and postsecondary planning (Jones, 1994; Schmidt, 2008). Thus, training and support for school counselors expanded to areas developed by the Vocational Education Act of 1946 and the National Defense Education Act (Gysberg, 2001).

**Vocational Education Act of 1946 & National Defense Education Act**

As a result of the vocational needs identified in World War II, the federal government began offering support for training and career services (Shear, 1965; Stephens Barrett, 1948). Specifically, reimbursement for vocational services became available, with the act funding up to $34 million per state (Stephens Barrett, 1948). The National Education Act of 1946, also known
as the George-Barden Act of 1946, was the first time the federal government provided public school funding for school counselor salaries, student program development, and professional training (Schmidt, 2008; Stephens Barrett, 1948).

Due to the minimal rules, states could choose how to best develop and implement vocational services in high school settings (Shear, 1965; Stephens Barrett, 1948). In addition, the George-Barden Act of 1946 legislated federal student loans, making vocational training accessible to more students post-high school (Schmidt, 2008). As technology advanced and needs within the education system were identified, the school counseling profession again transformed (Schmidt, 2008).

In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, catapulting the ongoing race with the United States for technology and science advancement (Wissehr et al., 2011). Sputnik 1 served as a “trumpet call to the U.S. education system” (Wissehr et al., 2011, p. 368). President Dwight D. Eisenhower answered that call by passing the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 (Schmidt, 2008; Wisseehr et al., 2011). The focus of the NDEA was to provide school systems with the financial and legislative support necessary to promote postsecondary education. Most importantly, the act earmarked funding for the training of professional school counselors (Gysberg, 2010; Schmidt, 2008).

At the time, the role of school counselors still varied significantly by state, school district, and individual schools, as did the financial allocations for the positions (Whiston, 2002). With the onset of the NDEA, the funding helped to increase the number of school counselors in the field, particularly within states that previously lacked financial support (Gysberg, 2010). While the professional growth was positive, it highlighted the need for professional cohesion that
transcended state and individual school systems' unique needs and led the profession into modern-day school counseling (Whiston, 2002).

**Modern Day School Counseling**

In 1952, the need for school counselors across the United States to coalesce became apparent, as a shared set of professional guidelines was lacking (ASCA, 2019). That need led to the birth of the ASCA (ASCA, 2019). With the establishment of a professional organization, a standard set of guiding principles, boundaries, professional development, and a unified voice for the profession emerged (Sabella, 2006). However, immersion in ASCA did not diminish all uncertainty within the school counseling profession (Schmidt, 2008).

The recognition of ASCA in the 1960s and 1970s welcomed a voice of professional leadership during a critical formative time of the profession (Schmidt, 2008). Previously, the role of school counselors was confined to vocational training (Schmidt, 2008). However, with the support of the NDEA, the Elementary and Secondary School Act, and the backing of ASCA, school counselors moved beyond the limitations of vocational training. School counselors emerged as an established position of professionals trained to meet students' educational and psychological needs (Gysberg, 2010).

Despite the positive momentum within the profession, more necessary changes emerged (Whiston, 2002). A more precise understanding of the unique needs of primary school counselors versus secondary school counselors emerged in the mid-1960s (Baker, 2001). The 1970s called for needed structure in the profession as states and schools continued to understand the variety of skills held by school counselors (Baker, 2001; Whiston, 2002). These significant
events in the progression of the school counseling programs distinguished the many specialized areas of school counseling and created a unified voice for a profession that was still very early in its infancy (Gysberg, 2001).

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, the school counseling profession has adopted additional roles and areas of expertise (Schmidt, 2008). As the role of school counselors continued to refine in scope, additional expectations of the profession emerged (Jones, 1994; Gysberg, 2001). Despite the progress in education regarding the profession and expansion of training, the debate regarding school counselors’ role in providing emotional and mental health services in the school setting continued (Gysberg, 2001).

Similar to the sixties and seventies, some believed that school counseling should focus solely on academic and vocational training. In contrast, others recognized the vast breadth of knowledge and skills school counselors hold (Baker, 2001). The result of continued efforts by ASCA and school counseling advocates was a more commonly understood role of the profession (Schmidt, 2008). Specifically, the 21st Century ushered in a more comprehensive view of the skillset of school counselors, including serving as advocates, change agents, collaborators, and campus leaders (Schmidt, 2008; Whiston, 2002). More complex functions and intricate program planning highlighted the need for data-driven decision-making and a clear and consistent framework for developing a comprehensive plan (Gysberg, 2001; Sabella, 2006).

American School Counselor Association

Since 1951, ASCA has served as the flagship professional organization for school counselors (Sabella, 2006). Now with more than 40,000 members, ASCA supports school
counselors’ needs through professional development, research, advocacy for students and professionals, and networking (ASCA, 2022). However, perhaps the most significant contribution to the school counseling field was the development of the *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (Dimmitt et al., 2005).

The *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* outlines a comprehensive school counseling program’s element that positively impacts student achievement (ASCA, 2022). It includes areas that address the systematic delivery of equitable services, creating and executing a developmentally appropriate curriculum focused on personal and academic growth and planning, and closing the achievement gap (ASCA, 2022). Further, it provides a set of ethical standards and appropriate activities specific to school counselors (ASCA, 2022). Previously, school counselors were adhering to standards established by the American Counselor Association, which while helpful, lacked the many nuances of the school counseling position (Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2018). Since its development, amendments to the *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling* have been made in 2005, 2013, and most recently in 2019 (ASCA, 2019a; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2018).

**School Counseling Training Programs**

Modern-day school counselors must be effective and dynamic to meet the many needs of students, staff, and stakeholders (Gibson et al., 2018; Lambie et al., 2019). Because school counselors’ needs and expectations are vast, well-designed, comprehensive, and accessible training programs are essential to prepare future school counselors (Gibson et al., 2018). Factors such as professional certification, availability and enrollment of school counseling programs,
accreditation concerns, and the role of counselor educators all play a part in the development of school counselors and the promotion of the profession. Thus, it is crucial to understand the current trends in these areas and how they may be impacting school counseling holistically.

**Criteria for School Counseling Certification**

Criteria for school counseling certification depend on the state where a school counselor works (Trevisan, 2020; Warren et al., 2020). While each state may have unique requirements, most share some conditions required for licensure (Carey & Martin, 2015). Specifically, all states require completed coursework from an accredited institution in school counseling, including practicum and internship experience in a K-12 school (ASCA, 2022; Carey & Martin, 2015). Passage of a state or national comprehensive exam is typically a condition for certification, with individual states determining which exam is required (ASCA, 2022). However, while some states have certification reciprocity, school counselors have no nationwide certification portability (Trevisan, 2020). Thus, upon relocating to a new state, certified school counselors must submit a new application for certification, making professional transitions difficult (Warren et al., 2020).

**Availability and Enrollment of School Counseling Master's Programs**

There are currently 490 school counseling master's programs available in the United States (ASCA, 2022). Each state offers at least one program, with the highest number of programs in Texas, with 38 unique school counseling programs (ASCA, 2022). Interestingly, the prevalence of digital learning continues to grow, with 28 fully online school counseling programs now available (ASCA, 2022). In 2018, CACREP accredited 871 counseling programs
in the United States (CACREP, 2018a). School counseling comprised only 30% of the total programs (CACREP, 2018a).

That same year, 29,307 students were enrolled in a clinical mental health program with 7,666 graduates (CACREP, 2008a). Comparably, overall enrollment in school counseling programs was 12,170, with only 3,493 students graduating (CACREP, 2018a). While the prevalence of school counseling programs and overall enrollment is lacking, an additional issue with training programs is the limited number of school counseling-specific counselor educators (Milsom & Akos, 2011; Warren et al., 2020).

**School Counseling Focused Counselor Educators**

In 2018, more than 52,000 students were enrolled in CACREP-accredited master's level counseling programs nationwide (CACREP, 2018a), and at the helm of those programs were counselor educators. The role of counselor educators is to develop counselors through teaching, supervision, mentorship, and professional engagements (Milsom & Akos, 2011; Woo, 2016). Not only are counselor educators responsible for teaching fundamentals of counseling, such as theories and techniques, but counselor educators work with students to develop professional identities, attitudes, behaviors, and values (Harrichand et al., 2021; Woo, 2016). Therefore, students must engage with counselor educators from professional counseling backgrounds to train them in their selected fields.

The growing number of students enrolling in master’s level counseling programs requires the number of counselor educators to grow (Hale & Bridges, 2020). However, in 2018 CACREP accredited only 85 counselor education and supervision programs, graduating only 479 counselor
educators to enter the field (CACREP, 2018a). Of additional concern is that counselor educators with school counseling experience are minimal (McMahon et al., 2014). While overall, there is an insufficient number of counselor educators available to meet the demands of counselor enrollment, institutions have the additional challenge of finding prepared and qualified counselor educators with a school counseling background (Milsom & Akos, 2011; West, 2010). Inadequate training may result as students enrolled in master’s counseling programs may not have the opportunity to learn from school counseling-focused counselor educators (McMahon et al., 2014; Milsom & Akos, 2011).

**CACREP 60 Semester Hour Requirement**

Recently, CACREP increased the required credit hours for school counseling programs. Previously, students must have completed forty-five master’s credit hours to complete a school counseling program (CACREP, 2018b). With the increased hour requirement, by July 2023, all CACREP-accredited school counseling programs will require sixty master’s credit hours (CACREP, 2018b). The policy change creates academic and programmatic cohesion across all counseling specialties (CACREP, 2018b). While the intention of the update is positive, the change has caused significant debate amongst counselor educators (Akos & Duquette, 2022).

Firstly, there is concern regarding the drastic number of programs the change will impact (Merlin et al., 2017). As of 2014, 74% of school counseling programs required fewer than 60 credit hours for program completion, and thus, must make significant changes to the curriculum to meet the new hour requirement (Akos & Duquette, 2022). Additional concerns relate to the impact the addition of credits will have on applicants. School counselor educators
are concerned that the additional cost for increased credits might reduce the overall number of program applicants and negatively impact the quality of teaching due to increased class loads (Merlin et al., 2017). Finally, the hardship of finding qualified counselor educators with school counseling experience may lead institutions to hire adjunct professors (West, 2010). The hiring of adjunct professors has increased steadily over the past several years (Hanson et al., 2018). While adjuncts play an essential role in many academic programs, CACREP-accredited programs have faculty to student ratio in which to remain compliant (CACREP, 2016).

**Professional Self-Efficacy Development**

Graduate training programs provide graduate students with training in relevant topics and skills and are a pivotal time in developing professional self-efficacy (Hill et al., 2008; Mullen et al., 2015). Self-efficacy is the confidence a school counselor holds in completing a task or accomplishing a goal (Sanders et al., 2017). Areas of developing self-efficacy can include the development of group facilitation skills (Springer & Schimmel, 2016), the development of a comprehensive school counseling program (Mullen et al., 2019), counseling skill building (Hill et al., 2008), and supporting students with diverse needs (Johnson et al., 2016).

Research indicates that successfully applying knowledge and skills increases professional identity and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Collins, 2014; Schiele et al., 2014). For many counselors-in-training, the opportunity to implement skills leading to increased self-efficacy first occurs in graduate training programs (Mullen et al., 2019). Additionally, coursework designed to meet high academic standards, such as those set forth by CACREP, has been shown to improve self-efficacy in counseling students (Adams, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2012; Mullen et al., 2019).
Impact of School Counselors

School counselors tremendously impact students and community stakeholders (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Pincus et al., 2020). Highly educated, well-trained, and motivated school counselors play an essential role in the education system, working with students, families, and stakeholders (Rowley, 2000). Strategic planning and interventions designed by school counselors can impact students with diverse backgrounds and varying needs (Brown & Trusty, 2005).

Research indicates that students who attend schools with strategic and comprehensive school counseling programs earn higher grades, report feeling more prepared for the future, have a favorable view of their school climate, and have improved relationships with teachers (ASCA, 2019a; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Lapan et al., 2001). Moreover, school counselors can impact the mental well-being of students, serving as an invaluable resource for the school system and the greater community (Collins, 2014). School counselors’ impact can be monumental, and being cognizant of the essential roles played by school counselors and the impact those roles have on the success of children and adolescents is a critical component of understanding and promoting the profession (Boulden & Schimmel, 2021; Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994).

Multifaceted Skill Sets of School Counselors

The American School Counselor Association describes school counselors as "systemic change agents," well-positioned to serve as advocates to support all students holistically (Ohrt et al., 2016). According to the ASCA position statement, the role of school counselors is to impact student growth in three domains: (a) academic development, (b) career development, and (c) social/emotional development (2018). While the roles of school counselors are well-defined, the
demands placed on the profession are vast and in a constant state of change (Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

To reach as many students as possible, school counselors are trained to deliver various topics in several ways (ASCA, 2018; Gibson, 2018; Lambie et al., 2019; Warren, 2020). Individual counseling, small group counseling, classroom lessons, teacher conferences, and large group presentations are all utilized to deliver information to students and stakeholders (ASCA, 2019a). Topics such as mental health awareness, academic planning and success, postsecondary options, decision-making, and addressing social, emotional, and societal issues are all areas in which school counselors can provide expert knowledge (Gibson, 2018; He et al., 202; Lambie et al., 2019; Warren, 2020).

The plethora of skills school counselors hold contribute to creating a healthy school climate that promotes growth and learning at all school levels (Nassar-McMillan, 2011; Warren et al., 2020). Elementary and middle school years are highly developmentally formative, and addressing students’ individual needs is imperative (Gibson, 2018). Additionally, schools providing greater access to school counselors show a higher graduation rate, fewer disciplinary referrals, and improved academic, personal, and social success (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) state that the mental health intervention of even one student in a classroom can induce widespread academic gains.

In a 2016 study, Ohrt and colleagues described eight support themes from school counselors identified by high school students. The eight themes of academic, personal/social, postsecondary, and advocacy emerged (Ohrt et al., 2016). In a study with elementary school students, similar themes were identified but greatly emphasized personal and social development
(Goodman-Scott et al., 2018). Also, elementary school counselors contribute most heavily to student and campus success via close collaboration with teachers and school staff (Rayle & Adams, 2008). School counselors’ comprehensive knowledge equips them to impact not only individual students but the holistic success of the school in its entirety (Young et al., 2018).

**Academic Achievement and Postsecondary Planning**

The public education system, including schools and educators, is evaluated on student outcomes primarily related to academic achievement (ASCA, 2017; Hines et al., 2017). In addition, accountability for school success and transparency of school achievement continues to increase (Erford, 2015). School counselors play an essential role in developing a successful academic climate through professional skill sets, including data analysis, classroom lessons, collaboration with faculty and administration, and advocacy for equitable access to courses for all students (ASCA, 2017; Hines et al., 2017).

Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) found that elementary school students, particularly boys, who worked with school counselors showed a statistically significant increase in academic achievement. Steen and Kaffengerter (2007) conducted a study assessing the impact of academic-focused small-group counseling on elementary school students. The findings indicate that 60% of the participants increased their language arts grade by at least 10% (Steen & Kaffengerter, 2007). A study by Sink and colleagues (2018) evaluated the impact of a comprehensive school counseling program on statewide assessments. Schools with an integrated, comprehensive school counseling program significantly outperformed schools without a
comprehensive school counseling program in language, math, and total core scores of Washington State exams (Sink et al., 2008).

At the high school level, school counselors have the additional academic challenge of graduation and dropout rates (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). While laws requiring school enrollment and attendance have encouraged more students to graduate high school, the school environment has been found to have a significant impact on graduation rates (Messacar & Oreopoulous, 2013). School counselors contribute to graduation in several ways. First, school counselors are trained to collect, review and analyze data as part of an early warning system (ASCA, n.d.; Neile et al., 2007). Additionally, advocacy, social justice, and equity for all students are also ways that the role of school counselors in preventing high school dropouts (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Carr & Galassi, 2012). Finally, collaboration with school faculty and families is also within the purview of how school counselors contribute to student academic success and graduation (Carr & Galassi, 2012).

School counselors play a vital role in creating a college-going culture and facilitating academic planning for college eligibility (Jeong Robinson & Roksa, 2016). In a 2018 study, Goodman-Scott and colleagues studied the impact of the counselor-to-student ratio on grade point average and graduation rate. The study’s findings show that as the counselor-to-student ratio decreased, the graduation rate and average grade point average increased (Goodman-Schinesott, et al., 2018).

Marisco and Getch conducted an additional study (2009) exploring the impact of a systemic intervention program by school counselors on Latino high school students. Through the integration of services such as parent/guardian workshops and group counseling focusing on the
college application process, financial education, and goal setting, the number of students who had completed a college application by January 1 increased by 15% from the previous year (Marisco & Getch, 2009). Bryan and colleagues (2011) found that as students' interactions with school counselors increased, so did the number of completed college applications.

The number of students attending a four-year institution after high school was higher in schools where school counselors were highly involved in college-related activities and instruction (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Belasco (2013) found that students who worked with a school counselor were likelier to attend a two- or year four-year postsecondary institution than not continuing their postsecondary educational journey. Perhaps most importantly, the success of students from diverse backgrounds depended more on engagement with a school counselor (Jeong Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Riegle-Crumb, 2010).

**Mental Health Services**

Positive mental health is crucial to academic success and effective learning (Kury & Kury, 2006). Conversely, mental health challenges may impact a student’s success at school and overall social, emotional, and academic well-being (Kelchner et al., 2020). Therefore, while students may initially work with their school counselor on academic concerns, the dynamic skills held by school counselors may lead to identifying a need to address mental health concerns.

One in six children between two to eight years old has a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC; 2022). Depressive symptoms in adolescents have increased dramatically over the past 30 years (Keyes et al., 2019), and death by suicide has tripled in numbers from 1999 to 2017 (Keyes et al., 2019). The onset of
the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated a previously worrisome state of mental health concerns among children (Meherali et al., 2021; Ozer, 2020; Pincus et al., 2020). Unfortunately, research findings support that an alarming percentage of students, upwards of 80% with a treatable mental health disorder do not receive services (Kaffenberger et al., 2013, Kataoka et al., 2002; Whitney & Peterson, 2019).

Schools are often the entry point for mental health services to students, and school counselors are often the first and only mental health professionals available (Carlson & Kees, 2018; Lambie et al., 2019). While long-term counseling services are not part of a school counselor’s role, short-term interventions are within the scope of appropriate tasks (ASCA, 2019a). Academic achievement, behavioral changes, social interactions and development, and goal setting are topics that school counselors often address with students (ASCA, 2019a; Brown & Trusty, 2005).

Due to the disparity between the number of school counselors and the prevalence of mental health needs among children, continuously counseling individual students is not reasonable (Christian & Brown, 2018; De Kruyf et al., 2013). Therefore, school counselors use multiple delivery methods to reach students (ASCA, 2019a). Classroom lessons, individual sessions, group counseling, and family and community workshops are ways school counselors provide direct services and address the mental health needs of students (ASCA, 2019a).

**Family Partnerships and Collaboration**

School counselors are trained to support students holistically, including collaborating with parents/caregivers to promote school-family-community partnerships (ASCA, 2022b;
Martin, 2017). While some parents/caregivers can recognize a mental health disorder in their child often, parent/caregiver education is necessary to ensure students receive appropriate mental health services (Teagle, 2002). Ideally, that partnership includes communication and collaboration with mental health professionals in the community (Brown et al., 2006; Martin, 2017). Therefore, school counselors must collaborate with families to support students’ success and wellness (McCarthy & Watson, 2018) by educating and strengthening the family dynamic (Teagle, 2002). As stated by Frawley and Kelchner (2022), “When families are successful, children grow into adults that are happy, secure and well balanced” (p. 6).

**Challenges Facing the School Counseling Profession**

School counselors face very challenging day-to-day tasks (O’Conner, 2018). Meeting the expectations of students, parents/guardians, and stakeholders creates a high-paced, multifaceted work environment which can be very difficult and frustrating (Wilder, 2019). Furthermore, social issues such as substance abuse, family and school violence, suicide, and homelessness continue to increase, exacerbating school counselors’ challenges (Wilder, 2019; Kendrick et al., 1994).

The current educator shortage crisis also magnifies the education system’s challenges (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The shortage of educators is even more profound than initially believed, with rural and high-poverty schools suffering the most (Devier, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Thus, identifying, recruiting, and hiring school counselors is particularly challenging in these unprecedented times. Nevertheless, the profession must adapt to the current climate and continue developing to meet all students’ needs (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).
**Occupational Outlook, 2020 - 2030**

Developed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) provides information on most professions in the United States. Insight includes duties performed on the job, work environment, pay, required training/education, and employment outlook for the next decade. In 2020, the projected need for school counselors was estimated to grow by 11%, faster than average for all occupations. Specifically, OOH projected at least 35,000 openings for school counselors annually. However, this projection occurred well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the growth forecast and annual vacant positions could be much higher.

**Overloaded Caseloads & Its Impact on Burnout**

During the 2021-2022 school year, only 14% of school districts reported meeting the ASCA-recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). States such as Hawaii, Florida, and the District of Columbia have so few school counselors that no school meets the ASCA recommended ratio (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). These findings are similar to data collected by ASCA following the 2018-2019 school year. School counselors’ national average caseload size was 430:1, with the largest average caseloads occurring in Arizona at 905:1 (ASCA, n.d.).

Such large caseloads are problematic (Shi & Brown, 2020). Research has shown that academic, social/emotional, and large school counselor caseloads may negatively impact postsecondary outcomes (Mullen et al., 2021; Shi & Brown, 2020). Further, school counselors with a large caseload are forced into a “gatekeeping” role as strategic decisions about delivering
counseling services (Corwin et al., 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Often high school counselors with large caseloads must give their time primarily to upper-level students navigating the high school graduation and postsecondary planning process, leaving underclassmen with limited access to their counselors (Corwin et al., 2004).

School counselors with higher caseloads have reported higher levels of perceived professional stress and lower job satisfaction (Kendrick et al., 1994; Lambie, 2006). In 2021, Mullen and colleagues conducted a study assessing the relationship between high caseloads and their impact on professional burnout, stress, and job satisfaction. The findings indicate that large caseloads lead to increased burnout, job stress, and lower job satisfaction (Mullen et al., 2021). Similar findings are reported by McCarthy and colleagues (2018), stating that the complicated nature of school counseling, including role ambiguity and large caseloads, can lead to harmful stress levels.

Conversely, small caseloads positively impact school counselor effectiveness (Kearney et al., 2021; Reback, 2010). Additionally, lower school counselor-to-student ratios are associated with better student outcomes (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Shi & Brown, 2020), including a correlation between lower disciplinary rates with a higher number of school counselors in elementary schools (Carrell & Carrell, 2006). Utilizing a national dataset, Goodman-Scott and colleagues (2018) found that students attending schools with school counseling ratios meeting the 250:1 ASCA recommendation had significantly higher GPAs. The same study found that high school students attending schools with lower caseloads were 1.85 times more likely to graduate high school (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018).
Gun Violence on School Campuses

Gun violence at schools has prompted legislative policy changes dating back to the early 1990s (Hilaire et al., 2022). The pervasiveness of school shootings has significantly influenced the educational and political systems in the United States over the past 20 years (Paolini, 2015). In 2022, there were 51 school shootings, totaling 40 deaths (Education Week, 2022). Students, families, staff, and communities have a shared concern about school safety and steps that can be taken to protect campuses (Hilaire et al., 2022; Schildkraut et al., 2015; Paolini, 2015). Efforts have been made to secure campuses, utilizing gates, metal detectors, and bullet-proof barriers (Hilaire et al., 2022). As these changes are made to facilities, the role of educators and school staff have been evaluated, including ways school counselors can contribute to preventative measures to decrease gun violence in schools (Paolini, 2015).

Regarding school violence, a primary role of school counselors relates to identifying potential perpetrators (Paolini, 2015; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Therefore, school counselors should develop relationships with students and know what questions to ask and how to ask them should concerning behaviors arise (Paolini, 2015). Additionally, statistics indicate that many school shooters have had similar experiences, such as grief and loss, bullying, anger management, depression, and low self-esteem (Langman, 2015; Paolini, 2015). Therefore, school counselors should design and implement a comprehensive school counseling program with group counseling programs to target students with these experiences (Paolini, 2015; ASCA, 2019b).

However, the perceived expectations of school staff and potential responses to school safety have left some educators apprehensive about their position or reluctant to enter the education field. For example, arming educators was highly debated in the wake of the Marjory
Stoneman Douglass shooting (Rogers et al., 2018). Having a firearm in the classroom, even within a teacher’s control, presents a physical and emotional safety risk for students and teachers alike (Rogers et al., 2018). When the University of Texas permitted faculty to begin carrying firearms on campus, multiple professors resigned from their posts, citing an unsafe work environment (Stack, 2016; Rogers et al., 2018). Perhaps the American Psychological Association reported the most sobering statistics in 2022. The study found that 49% of teachers and 34% of school mental health staff have considered leaving education due to fears associated with gun-related violence on campus (American Psychological Association; APA, 2022). Thus, there is reasonable concern that gun violence and its impact on educators could lead to an even more significant gap.

**Consequences of COVID-19**

The physical isolation, separation anxiety, and loneliness experienced by children during COVID-19 have had significant negative consequences (Pincus et al., 2020). Ma and colleagues (2022) systematically reviewed literature researching mental health trends in youth. Twenty-three studies were identified surveying a total of 57,927 children and adolescents. The prevalence of depression and anxiety among participants was 29% and 26%, respectively, with 48% of children showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Ma et al., 2021). Surging mental health issues have undoubtedly affected students' school success (Pincus et al., 2021). Yablon (2019) describes schools as a “safe zone” for students who have experienced trauma. Thus, school counselors face an unprecedented demand to provide mental health support for all students.
Lack of Professional Supervision

Upon graduation, mental health counselors are typically required to complete direct service hours under the supervision of a registered supervisor (Bledsoe et al., 2019). In Florida, counselors must receive one hour of supervision every two weeks, totaling a minimum of 100 supervision hours (Florida Board of Clinical Social Work, Marriage and Family Therapy, and Mental Health Counseling, 2022). The purpose of continued supervision is to assist junior professionals in turning learned counseling skills and techniques into individualized and practical skills. It can promote professional learning, development, and self-motivation (Villarreal-Davis et al., 2020). Further, the working alliance between supervisor and supervisee has been shown to increase the supervisee's self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Crockett & Hays, 2015). Thus, ongoing clinical supervision is a vital aspect of the ongoing development of novice counselors.

The need for supervising school counselors has reached a critical point as schools face unprecedented mental health issues among children and adolescents (Brott et al., 2021). However, school counselors are not required to complete additional hours of counseling supervision upon graduation (Brott et al., 2021). Often this leaves school counselors to receive support and professional guidance from school administrators (Brott et al., 2021; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). Administrators filling the supervisor role is not as ideal and may focus on schoolwide development and academics rather than developing a novice school counselor's counseling skills and techniques (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006).

While supporting students in academic progress and schoolwide development are appropriate roles for school counselors, a lack of counseling supervision can be problematic as school counselors work in demanding environments (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Therefore,
appropriate supervision is particularly important as it supports and improves counseling skills and may prevent professional burnout (Brott, 2021; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Maslach, 2017).

Burnout occurs when a job's demands impact a professional's ability to meet their own and client's needs (Maslach, 2017). The impact of burnout can be significant, with symptoms including poor job performance, absenteeism, compromised physical health (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), and fatigue and exhaustion (Armon et al., 2008). In a study by Bain and colleagues (2011), 89% of school counselors sampled reported experiencing burnout at least sometimes. However, should school counselors seek out supervision on their own, research has found that clinical supervision from a qualified school counseling supervisor may reduce the effects of burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018).

**Responses to Insufficient Number of School Counselors**

In response to the high demands facing school counselors, a call to action to strengthen the profession in unique ways has occurred (O’Connor, 2018; Warren et al., 2020). As the needs and financial opportunities vary from state to state, different programs have emerged to fill the gap in the best way possible (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Additionally, national organizations, such as ASCA, continue to advocate for equity in education and the promotion and support of school counselors.

**ASCA Advocacy Efforts**

The premier organization for advocacy of the profession, ASCA’s efforts primarily focus on legislation and bills promoting school counseling, improving student access to education, and increasing student access to mental health professionals (ASCA, 2022; Cigrand et al., 2015).
Heavily involved with federal legislative issues, ASCA collaborates with state school counseling organizations and other education and mental health-focused organizations to advance agendas (Havlik et al., 2019). At the national level, ASCA has been active throughout 2021 and the beginning of 2022. In December 2021, ASCA and partnering organizations strongly voiced the need for more mental health professionals in the school setting to address the severe shortage of school counselors, social workers, and other specialized instructional personnel (ASCA, 2022). In April 2021, ASCA was a participating organization urging the U.S. Secretary of Education to provide school loan debt relief to public service workers, including school counselors (ASCA, 2022).

**Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act**

In response to the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the Florida Department of Education passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (Plankon, 2020). The statute includes many requirements for school districts, including increasing safety officers and surveillance, training school staff, and increasing mental health professionals on campus (Brezenski, 2018; Plankon, 2020). Allocating more than $400 million to support the provisions statewide, lawmakers highlighted the importance of mental health professionals on school campuses (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, 2020; Plankon, 2020).

First, all school districts must receive a minimum of $100,000 for hiring additional mental health staff on campuses (Brezenski, 2018). School counselors, social workers, and other mental health professionals can be hired using the allocated funds (Marjory Stoneman Douglas
High School Public Safety Act, 2020). The statute calls for at least one safe-school officer to be present on each campus at all times and expands on requirements for staff training in crisis response and verbal de-escalation of students in distress (Curran, 2020; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, 2020).

Additionally, the statute mandates that school districts create a plan to allow school-based mental health personnel to increase time spent providing direct services to students (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, 2020). The act reinforces school counselors' critical role in developing children and adolescents (ASCA, n.d.). Also, the act recognizes the specialized training of school counselors to provide prevention and intervention of behavioral and mental health concerns through direct student services (ASCA, n.d.).

**Broward County, Florida**

In recent years, Broward County, Florida, has experienced the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and has faced an epidemic of opioid use and other drug abuse (Jacko et al., 2021; Plankon, 2020). Most recently, Broward County School District has experienced a significant shortage of school counselors and mental health counselors (Odzer, 2022). In response, Broward County established the *Our Community Partnership Initiative* and received a $1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to address the mental health needs of adolescents and families (Bakeman, 2021). In addition to the $1 million from the federal government, Broward County has pledged another $1 million to be funded by local government and donors (One Community Partnership, n.d.).
As part of Broward's One Community Partnership Initiative, Broward County School District will receive funding to identify and train school counselors to work within the school setting (Bakeman, 2021). Partnering with the University of Southern California, Florida Atlantic University, and Barry University, students enrolled in school counseling, family counseling, exceptional student learning support, and social work have the opportunity to work as student interns in Broward County during their final year (South Florida Times, 2021). The program focuses on training mental health professionals in the Broward community, including school counselors, and creating an intern-to-professional pipeline. In the first year, Broward County hired five of the 19 interns and is committed to hiring more as the program grows (South Florida Times, 2021).

**West Virginia University and Kanawha County Schools**

While the challenge of recruiting school counselors is at an all-time high, the uniqueness of rural districts makes hiring even more challenging (Grimes, 2020). Specialized partnerships and programs are being developed to address the issue (Boulden & Schimmel, 2021; Grimes, 2020). Boulden and Schimmel (2021) describe the collaboration between West Virginia University (WVU) and Kanawha County Schools (KCS), a rural community in Charleston, WV. The partnership aims to create an immersive experience for school counseling students by serving three elementary schools (Boulden & Schimmel, 2021). Further, the collaborative approach focuses on developing a hiring pipeline for KCS upon graduation.

A collaboration of this nature is valuable in Kanawha County. It has long-standing and substantial issues with intergenerational poverty, addiction, and mental health concerns (West
Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, 2016). In 2016, the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources reported that Kanawha County had the highest number of deaths related to alcohol and drug-related illnesses of all fifty-five counties in West Virginia. It is not surprising that West Virginia ranks sixth nationally in the percentage of children who have faced at least two Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; Felittie et al., 1998) and third in the rate of children who have met at least one ACE (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). In response to the problem, the collaboration between WVU and Kanawha County is deliberate in the training and developing school counselors who are well-trained in trauma response and the unique needs of a rural community.

The county's success in filling multiple school counseling vacancies resulted from the unique collaboration between KCS and WVU (Boulden & Schimmel, 2021). First, the Kanawha School District and WVU personnel interviewed interested school counseling students the semester before the internship began to assess their knowledge and skillset in mental health and academic responses. Selected school counseling students received a monthly stipend, housing allowance, and additional KCS funding. Those selected were placed in high-needs elementary schools with seasoned counselors who provide mentorship and a minimum of one hour of supervision each week. As rural communities often struggle to access mental health counseling, school counselors may be viewed as the only mental health experts available within a reasonable distance (Bradley et al., 2012; Grimes et al., 2014). Thus, the success of the KCS and WVU partnership ensures that mental health services can be provided.
Emergency Permits for Counselors-in-Training

The Texas Administrative Code (TAC) outlines the minimum qualifications for the hiring of school counselors, with three distinct certification types: (a) standard, (b) probationary, and (c) emergency (Cade & Parker, 2021). Standard certification is issued to individuals who have completed 48 hours at the master's level in school counseling curriculum, have at least two years of classroom teaching experience, and have passed the state examination (Hoover, 2021). However, school districts can apply for emergency permits when an educator with a standard certification cannot be secured for the position (Dooley, 2021).

To receive emergency status, districts must show specific evidence, including unsuccessful efforts to hire a certified professional, a support system in place to provide mentorship, and verification that the individual has been advised of the emergency permit rules and regulations (Dooley, 2021). Upon approval, districts may hire individuals as school counselors who are yet to complete their education, training, and supervision requirements but have begun an internship at a Texas public school or open-charter school (Cade & Parker, 2021; Texas Education Agency, 2012).

The first instance of documentation regarding the shortage of school counselors in Michigan was in 1993 (Hobson, 2000). Since then, the shortage has only worsened, leading to the development of a two-tiered credentialing system (Cade & Morganfield Parker, 2021). In addition to the standard school counselor endorsement, awarded upon completing a preparation program and passing exam scores, Michigan's second tier of certification is the preliminary school counselor credential (PSCC; Michigan Department of Education, 2022). Valid for three years, individuals who have completed at least thirty-four credits of the school counseling
curriculum and who have passed the subject area exam are eligible for hire (Kaye, 2012). However, throughout the three-year period, individuals must complete the school counseling curriculum to qualify for the standard professional school support personnel credential (Kaye, 2012).

While these approaches to certification are productive in filling vacancies, there are concerns regarding the approach. According to Cade and Parker (2015), the learning curve among school counselors on emergency permits far exceeds that of fully trained school counselors who spend an average of three years in a post-graduate program. Additionally, ASCA (2018) states that non-certified school counselors do not have the appropriate training or skills to be hired as school counselors.

**Conclusion**

Chapter two provided an overview of the relevant literature about the vast roles and many challenges facing school counselors, including (a) the history of school counseling, (b) school counseling training programs, (c) the roles and impact of school counselors, (d) the current challenges facing the school counseling profession, and (e) responses to high needs of the school counseling profession. It is understood that school counselors play an essential role in the academic, social, and postsecondary development of students. Additionally, it is known that the current state of the education system challenges the recruitment of school counselors. Although the existing research establishes the background and development of the school counseling profession, no current research focuses on understanding what attracts school counselors to the profession. Furthermore, there is a gap in the research regarding what support
systems and professional tasks encourage individuals to stay in the profession during the first few years. In developing this understanding, the promotion to recruit, train, and retain excellent school counselors to serve communities can further develop and better meet the needs of students, families, and communities.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter three describes the methodology utilized in conducting this research study. Specifically, this chapter presents the purpose of the study, research questions, design and sample, data collection process, and data analysis process. The purpose of this study is to develop a grounded theory of the factors contributing to school counselors selecting their profession. The study also aims to develop a grounded theory related to the supports which lead to professional retention for at least three years. Thus, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was chosen as the research design.

Purpose of the Study

There is currently no existing theory related to the personal and professional factors contributing to the career trajectory of school counselors. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to establish a developmental theory regarding the factors contributing to school counselors selecting their profession. Similarly, there is no existing theory related to factors that influence school counselors to remain in the profession. Therefore, an additional purpose of the study was to establish a developmental theory regarding the supports that lead to the retention of professional school counselors after three years.

Institutions offering school counseling programs of study can use the study findings to recruit individuals to apply to the program. Recruiting within specific undergraduate programs and training academic advisors on attributes of potential school counseling students can be employed. Additionally, the developed grounded theory can benefit programs when utilized in the applicant selection process. School districts can utilize the developmental theory related to
retention to increase the retention rates of school counselors. Findings can be used to guide the interview process and hiring decisions. School districts may also integrate the findings to develop retention programs, while campus administrators can use the findings to inform assigning appropriate tasks to professional school counselors, leading to retention.

**Research Questions**

A well-developed research question is pivotal in conducting a quality study (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Often research questions develop out of curiosity or an interest in a particular topic (Agee, 2009; Janesick, 2000). Unclear or poorly defined research questions can lead to unfocused research, while well-defined questions can lead to precise and rigorous findings (Bryman, 2016). Literature reviews, research methodologies, decision-making regarding data collection and participants, and data analysis and findings are all impacted by the quality of a research question (Bryman, 2016). Thus, research questions may change throughout a study as understanding the problem unfolds (Agee, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2007; Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Qualitative research seeks to make meaning through inquiry, but research questions should be free of phrasing that implies presupposition (Agee, 2009). Research questions must be succinct, open-ended, and unambiguous (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

The research questions for this study originated from the awareness of the current shortage of school counselors. As a former school counselor and a developing counselor educator, I sought to engage in research that may assist in addressing the issue. Thus, the provisional research question was broad and a literal explanation of the question (Charmaz,
Refining the question occurred throughout developing the study. Words such as “motivations,” “influences,” and “relationships” were all examples of words included in prior iterations of the research question. “Motivations” was changed as the study did not explore motivational theory. “Influences” was amended as it may infer a quantitative methodology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), and “relationships” was removed to allow for the research question to be more open-ended for participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The resulting questions were selected to develop a theory regarding the factors contributing to school counselors entering and remaining in their careers after working the first few years. Specifically, the questions were designed to theorize the factors contributing to school counselors entering and staying in the profession, consistent with a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2008; Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the present study was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors contributed to professional school counselors selecting their career?
2. During the first 3-5 years of their career, what supports have professional school counselors experienced that contributed to remaining in the profession?

Research Design

Background of the Methodology

Grounded theory was developed in 1967 by two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Kenny & Fourie, 2014; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Strauss and Glaser
actively mentored graduate students, encouraging the study and integration of the grounded
theory methodology (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Mentoring students caused variations of
philosophies to emerge as the approach was researched and matured (Kenny and Fourie, 2014).
Now, there are three distinct philosophies: post-positivist grounded theory, interpretivist
grounded theory, and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz; Rieger, 2018).

Influenced by mentorship and teaching from Strauss and Glaser, Kathy Charmaz created
the constructivist approach to grounded theory (Kenny & Fourie, 2014; Rieger, 2018). Charmaz
translated grounded theory's traditional tenets and philosophy into a contemporary interpretation
(Charmaz, 2014; Kenny & Fourie, 2014; Rieger, 2018) and focused on flexibility rather than
prescriptive rules (Charmaz, 2014). Research practices, experiences, and interactions with others
construct the data and guide theory development (Charmaz, 2014). These factors are reflected in
the tenets and common data collection strategies, the confirming and disconfirming process,
coding, and analysis (Ghezelieh & Emami, 2009), distinguishing constructivist grounded theory
from other traditions.

The constructivist grounded theory method differs from other approaches to grounded
theory in several ways. First, constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that prior knowledge
on the topic does exist and allows for literature to be reviewed at any point throughout the study
(Charmaz, 2008; Sebastian, 2019). However, while information on the topic may be known,
prior knowledge cannot control the direction of the research (Sebastian, 2019). Instead, the
researcher must be cognizant of how prior knowledge influences the examination of the research
(Sikolia et al., 2013). In a post-positivist or interpretivist approach, no prior knowledge should be
held prior to beginning a study, but existing literature is not reviewed until the data analysis is complete and findings are finalized (Sebastian, 2019). Next, the approach to coding is unique in constructivist grounded theory. Unlike classical grounded theory, which focuses primarily on patterns and trends within the data, constructivist grounded theory allows for flexibility in the coding process, including data falling within more than one core category (Sebastian, 2019). Finally, in constructivist grounded theory, the researcher is viewed as the co-creator of knowledge (Charmaz, 2008), influencing the research through interactions with participants (Charmaz, 2014; Ghezelieh & Emami, 2009; Rieger, 2018). Therefore, the final theory is developed with the researcher’s perspective embedded and is considered an interpretation of a theory rather than an exact representation (Sebastian, 2019).

Rationale for the Research Design

After an extensive review of the existing literature, no existing theory related to personal and professional contributions leading to pursuing a career in school counseling was identified. Additionally, no existing theory regarding support contributing to the retention of professional school counselors beyond three years was identified. The development of these theories can impact the recruitment efforts of school counselors and support school districts' retention efforts. Therefore, a grounded theory methodology was selected for the research design.

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that seeks to generate a theory based on systematically obtained and analyzed data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ghezelieh & Emami, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is an appropriate method when a clear idea of how a model, idea, or process is unknown (Charmaz, 2014). The approach seeks to unfold a social process through
inductive reasoning, leading to a proper understanding of the phenomena of a particular area (Charmaz, 2014; Rieger, 2018). However, the purpose of grounded theory is not to find an ultimate truth or prove a hypothesis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Instead, it focuses on the participants’ typical social processes (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The cooperative nature and repetitive data collection and analysis approach influenced this study's methodological selection. Theories are not to be discovered (Charmaz, 2000). Rather, the grounded theory methodology allows theories to be developed based on past and present experiences (Charmaz, 2000; Mills et al., 2006a). Unlike other grounded theory approaches that position the researcher primarily as an observer, constructivist grounded theory holds value in the relational nature of researcher and participant (Clayton, 2014; Mills et al., 2006a).

**Instrumentation and Qualitative Research Protocols**

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Procedure**

Before data collection, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Florida was received. The study was determined to be of minimal risk to the participants (see Appendix A). All study participants received a copy of the informed consent via email before participating in the interview (see Appendix B). Informed consent was verbally reviewed with each participant, including the right to opt-out of the study at any time. Because the study was determined to be of minimal risk, obtaining signatures from participants was not required. However, the assurance of confidentiality was discussed before beginning the interview. Participants were informed of maintaining all recordings on a password-protected computer, with documents saved in a secure system. Participants were informed that no
identifying names would be in the study write-up. Instead, participants will be identified by pseudonyms. Finally, participants were notified that all demographic surveys were stored on a Qualtrics database.

**Bracketing Process**

Bracketing is a process of self-discovery, is recurring and multilayered, and should occur throughout the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010). There is a lack of a universally accepted definition of bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Rather, researchers from differing methodologies and theoretical viewpoints posit bracketing differently (Tufford & Newman, 2010). As noted by Creswell and Miller (2000), beliefs and biases related to the study must be acknowledged early in the process. Therefore, the bracketing process for this study began before conducting the first interview and continued throughout the process. Thus, multiple steps of the bracketing process were employed, including (a) completing a positionality statement, (b) reflexivity, and (c) peer debriefing.

**Researcher Positionality**

I am a 36-year-old cisgender female Caucasian doctoral candidate in a Counselor Education and Supervision program at a large research institution in the southeast. Born and raised in a small, suburban town in the inland northwest, I completed my K-12 education in a public school setting and earned a bachelor’s degree in public relations at a medium-sized public institution. After working in the public relations field, I returned to school and earned a master’s degree in school counseling at a small private institution.
Before beginning the doctoral program, I worked as a school counselor for nine years. All nine years were spent at the high school level, with one year in the inland northwest and the following eight years in the southeast. All schools were designated as Title 1 schools. I served as a school counseling intern supervisor for two counselors in training while working in the southeast region. I have experience working with minoritized populations, including students who are unhoused and first-generation college students.

A school counselor can significantly influence a student's life for many years. Children and adolescents must have an advocate, a safe person to confide in and look to for support. For many students, that person is a school counselor. I hope all students will have a positive experience with their school counselors and recognize that the opportunity to create a supportive relationship with a school counselor may be challenging with the current counselor shortage. Thus, this study established developmental theories to add knowledge that can be used through deliberate and research-based efforts to recruit and retain school counselors.

Upon beginning the data analysis process, I had some initial thoughts on what codes may emerge. These thoughts were developed based on my professional experiences and relationships with colleagues. I reflected on my career as a professional school counselor and considered what led me to follow the career path and remain in the field for nine years.

I anticipated many participants would share that a work schedule conducive to their family life would be discussed as an influence of entering the profession. I anticipated hearing participants share examples of positive experiences with their school counselors. Regarding support influencing the decision to remain in the profession, I expected campus administrators to be the focus of the conversation. I anticipated that encouragement from family members to stay
in the field would be commonly shared. Specifically, I anticipated participants with children would reference the common schedule as an influence to remain in the profession.

**Reflexivity**

Engaging in reflexivity acknowledges the importance of self-awareness (Patton, 2002). It encourages recognizing personal and intellectual connections with the participants and how those connections interact with the findings (Adeagbo, 2021; Goodall, 2000). Specifically, political, linguistic, and social influences and how they may impact what is known and how it is known should be reflected upon (Patton, 2002).

Engaging in reflexivity early in the process, beginning with reflecting on what areas of school counseling could be studied. I wished to explore many elements based on my personal experiences as a school counselor. I was also influenced by anecdotal information from colleagues in the field. As the study continued to develop, I engaged in reflexivity, often based on Patton’s “Reflexive Triangle” (p. 66; see appendix C for an example of the use of the “Reflexive Triangle”). I recognized that my enthusiasm for school counseling and positive experiences with students, families, and administrators might impact the tone and manner in which I interact with participants (Patton, 2002). Further, after completing the positionality statement, I reflected on how my background as a school counselor may influence how participants interact with me.

**Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing involves discussing the study’s methodology, analysis, and process with an individual not involved with the project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Working with a peer
knowledgeable in qualitative methodology is an ideal person to collaborate with (Hadi & Closs, 2016). Doing so provides an opportunity to ensure that emerging codes are logical and critically discuss the perspectives that lead to the findings (Hadi & Closs, 2016).

A colleague who is well-informed in qualitative methods was consulted in the peer debriefing process. Specifically, methodological theory, possible coding process complications, assistance in writing a neutral interview protocol, and bias potential were discussed throughout the peer debriefing meetings. The first meeting was held before the study proposal and continued monthly until the completion of the study. In addition, informal peer debriefing occurred after the first few interviews and throughout the findings writing process. Recognition of phrasing and tone in the interviews, dialogue related to reflexivity, and improved clarity in writing resulted from peer debriefing.

**Participation Criteria**

The following inclusion criteria were used to select participants: (a) hold an active Florida school counseling professional certificate; (b) has completed at least three school years and no more than five school years in the profession; (c) has a professional contract for the 2022-2023 school year; (d) work in the state of Florida. Specifically, criteria (b) “has completed at least three school years, and no more than five school years in the profession” was selected to ensure participants were still cognizant of experiences that influenced their decision to enter the profession. Additionally, to maintain a strengths-based study, recruiting participants early in their careers may have decreased the likelihood that they are experiencing professional burnout.
Recruitment Procedures

The snowball approach was applied to recruit participants. The snowball recruitment approach is described as utilizing relationships and acquaintances to recruit participants (Sharma, 2017). It is one of the most popular sampling methods in qualitative research as it utilizes existing networks and referrals (Parker & Scott, 2019). Recruiting typically begins with a few individuals known to fit the criteria (Parker & Scott, 2019; Sharma, 2017). From there, participants are asked to recommend other individuals who may be willing to participate (Parker & Scott, 2019).

Consistent with snowball sampling, recruitment began by sending a request for participation to five former colleagues across three surrounding school districts. Three of the five agreed to participate in the study. The three participants agreed to refer individuals from their professional networks who may be interested in participating. As a result, nine additional qualifying individuals agreed to be interviewed. A colleague from an extracurricular club distributed the recruitment email (see Appendix D) to the school counseling department at her school of employment, resulting in two participants. Four participants were identified through communicating with professional school counselors at the Florida School Counselors Association annual conference. Counselor educators from other in-state institutions offered to email the recruitment message to program graduates resulting in three qualifying participants. In total, 21 individuals were interviewed. Interested professionals completed a provided Qualtrics survey as an initial qualification screening survey. Eligible participants were then contacted directly, and an interview date was selected. Upon reaching saturation (described below), solicitation of participants ceased, and the Qualtrics screening survey was closed.
All participants were compensated for their time with a $25 electronic gift card from Amazon. The gift card was delivered to the email address provided by the participants upon completing the interview. Financial support from the gift card incentives was supported by the Southern Association of Counselor Education and Supervision Excellence in Research Award in the amount of $500.

**Participant Interviews**

**Participant Demographics**

Data collection was conducted via telephone interviews with 21 unique individuals. All participants were interviewed once. Five participants responded to follow-up questions based on a need to clarify elements of the prior interview. Before the first interview, participants completed an online demographic questionnaire (see appendix E). Questions regarding gender, age, years in the profession, and caseload were included (see Table 1). The average age of the participants was 33.5 years old. Six participants indicated they were between 40 and 50 (29%), and 15 indicated they were younger than 40 (71%). Three participants identified as male (14%), and 18 participants identified as female (86%), and the average years of professional school counseling experience were 4.23 years. Eleven participants (52%) were working at the high school level, 3 (14%) at the middle school level, and seven (33%) indicated they were working at the elementary school level. All the participants were under contract for the 2022 - 2023 school year in Florida, spanning eight districts. Of the 21 participants, only one had a caseload meeting the ASCA recommended ratio of 250:1, and 11 had a caseload of at least 450 students. Table 1 indicates the participant demographics. All names have been changed to pseudonyms.
Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
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<th>Participant Name</th>
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<th>Identified Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Questions**

By only asking a limited number of questions allows the participant to share their story without the preconceived bias of the interviewer’s questions (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, interviews were conducted following an interview protocol in a semi-structured format. Using the interview protocol in a semi-structured format created consistency across all interviews and allowed additional questions to be asked when necessary. Grounded theory methodology seeks to develop an understanding of what happens, how it happens, and why it happens (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, interview prompts utilizing “why,” “what,” and “how” questions are often integrated into interviews (Charmaz, 2014).
Prompts created for this study were designed to promote detailed responses regarding the interviewee’s experiences and perspectives regarding the decision to pursue a career in school counseling. Examples of prompts include: (a) “When did you first think about studying school counseling?”, (b) “What assumptions did you have about the role of a school counselor?”, (c) “How would you describe the events that led to you applying for your master’s program?” (See appendix F for a complete list of questions). All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 15:35 and 53:44 minutes. The average length interview length was 29:59.

Upon beginning the data analysis process, it was determined that a follow-up conversation with some participants would be advantageous to the study. Six participants were contacted and asked if they would clarify some statements. Five participants agreed, and one participant, Lisa, declined to respond. It should be noted that the first (and only) interview with Lisa was the shortest conversation with any participant. The data collected from the interview with Lisa was analyzed, coded, and included in tables for this study. However, the use of data collected from her interview should be cautioned.

Data Analysis Procedures

“A theory states relationships between abstract concepts and may aim for either explanation or understanding” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012, p. 41). The development of theories is intended to make an account of something that has happened or why it happened (Charmaz, 2014). Reflection, intuition, and judgment are key in evaluating qualitative data (Carcary, 2009). The interpretative nature of data analysis allows a theory to be constructed through the interaction between the researcher and the participants and encourages analytic
reflection of the collected data (Charmaz, 2014; Sebastian, 2019). The interplay between the circumstances, people involved, and the interrelationships within the scope of the research impact the meaning derived from the data analysis (Carcary, 2009). Thus, the study included multiple steps in the data analysis process. It is important to note that while the preceding sections are outlined individually, the cyclical nature of grounded theory dictates that the data collection and analysis process is neither linear nor distinct. As stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the process “should blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end” (p. 43).

**Memo Writing**

In grounded theory, memo writing is one of the most critical processes to engage in (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). One intermediate step between data collection and writing the findings, memoing is an informal process that records emerging thoughts at the moment (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978). Documenting thoughts about interesting moments helps identify vital ideas for continued analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Memoing is a detailed record of the thinking process and is a key element in developing the theory (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). While there are many different approaches to memoing, there is no one way to engage in the process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014).

Stake (1995) states, “Good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking” (p. 19). Memo writing is an exercise to process thoughts about the study process, participants, and emerging phenomena (Saldaña, 2021). By engaging in this reflective process, the researcher can learn about the data rather than summarize or categorize it (Rieger, 2014;
Memo writing began at the onset of the study. A dedicated memo writing journal was kept to reflect on possible emerging themes, document statements requiring clarification with the participants, and any additional notes promoting critical thinking (Ortlipp, 2008). Engaging in the memo writing process encouraged reflection on the data and began the initial coding process (Saldaña, 2021).

Upon completing the interviews, audio files were uploaded to Otter.ai to complete the transcription process. The formatting of the transcription was line numbered for ease of coding. Then, the recording was played while correcting any transcription errors. Next, the interview was again listened to in its entirety with accompanying memo writing in the designated methodological journal. Initial ideas, questions, and connections emerged during the process. After listening to the recordings, memos were reviewed and notations regarding thoughts that would benefit from further investigation were taken. The interview was then played a second time with continued memo writing. Nuances in pauses, tone changes, and subtle comments were noted.

The approach of memo writing changed throughout the study. A freewriting approach (Charmaz, 2014) was used in the early stages of coding (see appendix G). In the designated journal, thoughts about the interview, my reaction to the interviewee, questions about the participant’s responses, and further questions were written out. The memos became a natural way to initiating the thinking process. Early memo writing was highly tentative as there was less data
and codes to consider (Charmaz, 2014; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). However, it yielded valuable thoughts. For example, in the early memo writing process, additional interview questions to ask future participants were developed, continued personal reflexivity occurred, and thoughts regarding potential theories were recognized (Charmaz, 2014).

As the constant comparison method was used in coding (see below), codes and categories became more evident partly due to the changes in memos (Hallberg, 2006). Thus, a clustering approach to memo writing was utilized in the focused coding process (see appendix H for an example). The cluster technic allowed for the visual representation of how initial codes interact and emerge into potential categories (Rico, 1983). Additionally, focused freewriting accompanied the clustering approach to entice reflection and deeper understanding of tentative categories. Memo writing towards the end of the study primarily focused on understanding how codes and conditions intersected in the axial coding scheme. In doing so, the relationship between codes became clear and led to the theories' development (Charmaz, 2014).

**Coding the Data**

Coding is a key element of the qualitative research data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). It is described as a systematic way of organizing segments of data in a manner that can categorize and summarize (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013). Data segments are classified and categorized to separate and sort ideas analytically (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Codes are often words or short phrases that provide a salient idea of the data (Saldaña, 2021). Several methodologies are associated with qualitative research, and each has a unique
approach to the coding process. Researchers must be mindful that the selected coding process and the number of coders coincide with the selected methodology (Saldaña, 2021).

Individual coders often complete qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2021). I served as the single coder for the present study, as is consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Since the researcher is actively involved in constructing the theory (Charmaz, 2014), a single coder approach is common in constructivist grounded theory as it allows for continuous immersion in the data and encourages continued and deeper analysis (Charmaz, 2015).

There is no “right” answer to coding (Elliott, 2018). Thus, finding the “right” answer should not be the focus. Instead, the focus should be on remaining authentic to the data and the analysis process (Elliott, 2018). Therefore, memo writing, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed to increase the reliability of the codes (Elliott, 2018; Saldaña, 2021).

For the present study, initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding were utilized. The three-prong approach is coding is consistent with the constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014; O’Connor et al., 2018). However, completing all three types of coding was not done in a step-by-step process, followed by the development of a theory. Instead, the constant comparative approach was employed.

Grounded theory is unique as it utilizes an iterative approach to data collection and data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hallberg, 2009). Rather than waiting until all data has been collected to begin the analysis process, the data analysis process begins with the first interview (Charmaz, 2014). The constant comparative approach can lead to generating and exploring new codes and developing and verifying new theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Comparing statements made by participants within the interview, between interviews, and between
participants to identify similarities and differences in statements (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, the iterative nature of the approach encourages theory development throughout the study (O’Connor et al., 2018). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the coding process.

Figure 1

*Visual Representation of the Coding Process*

**Initial Coding**

Initial coding is organizing data of similar major categories of information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In an open-ended approach, initial coding does not necessarily follow a formulaic method. Instead, initial coding includes consistent revisions as ideas emerge and the theory develops (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Initial codes are
provisional and comparative; as the coding process continues, the codes are amended to fit the data allowing data to be seen in a new light (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013).

The data analysis process began with the completion of the first interview. After transcription was completed utilizing Otter.ai, the interview audio was listened to, followed by initial coding. The iterative process of listening to the transcription and engaging in coding immediately upon completing individual interviews occurred throughout the study. As interviews served as the data source, the initial coding phase utilized the line-by-line approach (Charmaz, 2014). In doing so, coding occurred “quickly and spontaneously” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 151), providing primary data patterns (Patton, 2002).

In the initial coding phase, it is important to focus on words that reflect action and processes rather than people, topics, or themes to begin developing codes (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Initial codes were indicated on the electronic transcription (see Appendix I for an example) with additional notes taken in the dedicated memo writing journal. Examples of initial codes include: (a) studied psychology in high school, (b) hating job motivated change, (c) death in the family and parent's divorce, and (d) earned additional professional certifications.

**Focused Coding**

The second step in the coding process was focused coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The role of focused coding is identifying the most frequently used and significant codes (Saldaña, 2021). In doing so, data is sorted and develops the theory (Charmaz, 2014). Unlike initial coding, which involves assessing the data line-by-line, focused coding aims to merge
initial codes into larger categories (Charmaz & Thornberger, 2021). Focused codes based on findings most pertinent to the emerging theory and logically aligning with each other are created (Charmaz, 2014). However, the coding process is not linear (Charmaz, 2014). As focused coding advances, ideas or insights to be studied through the initial coding process may emerge (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021).

The focused coding process began by reviewing the initial codes and creating general categories. Some examples of the first focused codes created include: (a) influence of K-12 education, (b) conflict within a family, (c) commitment to children and adolescents, and (d) professional relationships. Then, through reviewing notes and continued memo writing, initial codes were refined into focused codes. In doing so, focused codes became more precise, and codes initially missed in the focus coding process were added. Upon completing the focused coding process, eight focused codes were identified: (a) personality characteristics, (b) personal experiences with mental health support, (c) desire to work with children and adolescents, (d) desire to work in the K-12 setting, (e) relationships with students, (f) support from administrators, (g) relationship with colleagues, and (h) lifelong learner. However, following open and focused coding, there was still no clear understanding of emergent theories.

**Axial Coding**

A third type of coding is sometimes required in the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2014). Axial coding aims to synthesize data beyond what is developed in the initial and focused coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Large data sets developed in the initial and focused coding phase are further refined to clarify the research findings (Charmaz, 2014). Codes
are “sharpened to achieve its best fit.” (Glaser, 1978, p. 62). The “coding paradigm” developed by Strauss (1987) was utilized to guide the axial coding process. The theories' central phenomena or mechanisms are identified as the causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and actions/mechanisms leading to the consequence (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Causal, Contextual & Intervening Conditions**

Identifying conditions allows for further analysis leading to links between categories (Charmaz, 2014). Specifically, they lead to answering why, when, and where questions that may arise from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Similar to the iterative nature of the open, focused, and axial coding process (Charmaz, 2014), identifying and differentiating causal, contextual, and intervening conditions is done cyclically (Kelle, 2007).

Casual conditions bring about the emergent theme (Simmons, 2017). They are often the underlying factors necessary to explain the emergent phenomenon (Kelle, 2007). Contextual conditions arise from an environment or situation that brings about a phenomenon (Saldaña, 2021; Simmons, 2017), while intervening conditions refer to conditions that occur once the action has begun (Simmons, 2017). Developmental theories became clear by identifying conditions leading to the central theme, and data analysis was discontinued.

**Discontinuation of Analysis**

The overall goal of qualitative data collection is not to conduct a certain number of interviews but to reach saturation (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017; Boddy, 2016). First coined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as an approach used in grounded theory, there are now multiple definitions of saturation (Saunders et al., 2017). Urquhart (2013) and Given (2016) similarly
describe saturation as reaching the point where no new themes emerge from the data, and the same codes continue to develop. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that saturation occurs when no new information is derived from the data, while Guest and colleagues (2006) state that saturation occurs when new information cannot be gleaned in the coding process.

Grounded theory is most closely associated with theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2017). Theoretical saturation is described as reaching the point in the data analysis process where continued sampling and analyzing data does not yield new data, and all theory concepts are well developed (Morse, 2004). Clearly defined connections between the categories are necessary to achieve theoretical saturation (Morse, 2004).

While reaching a certain sample size is not the determining factor for saturation, ideal sample size ranges for grounded theory studies have been suggested. According to Marshall and colleagues (2013) and Creswell (2018), the suggested sample size for grounded theory should include no less than 20 participants and no more than 40 participants. Morse (2000) proposed 20 to 30 interviews as a target but noted that the heterogeneity of the participants might influence the final number. Hennink and colleagues (2016) describe that theoretical saturation is achieved by reaching code and meaning saturation. Code saturation is when the researcher has heard the same responses, likely occurring after interviewing nine individuals (Hennink et al., 2016). Meaning saturation describes when the research fully interprets the data and likely occurs after interviewing 16-24 individuals (Hennink et al., 2016).

The present study included interviewing 21 individual participants at least once. In addition to member checking, five participants participated in a second interview for clarification of some responses. The number of participants aligns with the aforementioned suggested sample
sizes. Additionally, committee members provided feedback about emergent codes throughout the process. Therefore, theoretical saturation was confidentiality reached.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, the methodological approach for the study was outlined. Descriptions and justifications for the theoretical approach, recruitment and selection of participants, and trustworthiness through bracketing were included. While chapter three explains the study development and execution, the following chapter will present the results and findings from the data.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The present study aimed to develop a theory of the influences contributing to school counselors selecting their profession. Additionally, the study aimed to develop a theory of the support received by school counselors which influenced their decision to remain in the profession. The qualitative methodology of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016) was employed to develop the theories. Twenty-one unique participants were interviewed for this study (see table 2). Each individual was interviewed at least once, with five participants responding to follow-up questions for clarification. Initial, focused, and axial coding were performed to analyze the collected data. The following chapter will present the findings of the study. Biosketches of the participants providing exemplar data highlighting the theories are included.

Table 2

Participant Professional Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th># of Years in Profession</th>
<th># of Schools Worked At</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>School Enrollment</th>
<th>Caseload</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>2,800</td>
<td>350-450</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>450+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>350-450</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carlita</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>450+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denisa</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>700</td>
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<td>Elisa</td>
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<td>Faith</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>450+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gini</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>350-450</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Krystal</td>
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<td>Lisa</td>
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<td>Elementary</td>
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<td>Lydia</td>
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<td>Maggie</td>
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<td>Marcus</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2,800</td>
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<td>Monica</td>
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<td>2,150</td>
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<td>Paul</td>
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<td>Stephen</td>
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<td>Elementary</td>
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<td>Wendy</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>450+</td>
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</table>
Participant Biosketches

Following the data collection and analysis process, the occurrence of codes were counted by participant. Rather than using data from all 21 participants in the findings, a few exemplar responses from specific participants are used. Three participants have been selected to represent the broader data set. These participants were selected as they align with the highest number of emerging codes and provide insight into the topics consistent with most participants. Below are biosketches for each of the three participants, inclusive of background regarding their personal and professional backgrounds.

Daniela

Participant #11, Daniela, is a 27-year-old white/non-Hispanic female. When she was 14, Daniela’s parents divorced, straining her relationship with her mother. Shortly after the divorce was finalized, Daniela was kicked out of her home. Her siblings, both younger than Daniela, stayed in the home with their mother. Daniela took on the role of advocate for her siblings, and even now as adults is looked to as the maternal figure in their lives. Despite the turmoil, Daniela graduated from high school and continued to college. She earned a degree in psychology, then took a few years off to travel and explore career options. Following her travels, Daniela embarked on a career in the restaurant industry. Eventually, the long hours were impacting her life-work balance, and she decided to begin her master’s work in school counseling. Daniela has been a school counselor for four years and has worked at three schools, one middle school and two high schools. Before becoming a school counselor, Daniela was a manager at a dessert bar. Therefore, Daniela is a mnemonic for dessert.
Lydia

Participant #7, Lydia, is a 30-year-old white/non-Hispanic female. She grew up in the midwest alongside a younger brother, mother, and father. She was shy and reserved at a young age, stating that she was very quiet. Because of her reserved nature, in the primary years of school, Lydia had few friends. She was often alone and apprehensive to speak up for herself, and thus, was often the target of significant bullying. The bullying continued in middle school and high school, and Lydia found support in peers who were also the victims of bullying. In those relationships, she found a role in caring for others and sharing her experiences to get them through the process. In college, she worked as an orientation leader for incoming first-year students, an experience she stated led her to school counseling. Lydia has been a school counselor for three years, all at the same high school. Lydia held a job as an orientation leader that helped guide her toward the school counseling profession. Therefore, Lydia is a mnemonic for leader.

Paul

Paul, participant #20, is a 28-year-old white/non-Hispanic male. Adopted at a young age, Paul has one younger sister he grew up with. They had always had a close relationship and continue to be closeknit as adults. Paul also has two other siblings, however, he does not really refer to them as siblings as he does not know them or have any sort of relationship with them. His father was in the military, retiring after many years stationed at a base in Florida. Paul enrolled in a psychology course in high school, which developed his love for the subject. After graduating high school, Paul first studied world religions as he intended to pursue a career as a
pastor. However, he changed his mind, Paul majored in psychology and continued his education in a school counseling master’s program. Much of Paul’s life and professional perspectives lies in his upbringing in a military family. Paul is in his fourth year of professional school counseling. All four years of his experience have been completed at the same high school. Paul’s original plan was to study ministry and work as a pastor. Thus, Paul is a mnemonic for pastor.

Findings

Data analysis was completed using an iterative initial, focused, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2018). The following describes the findings associated with the two research questions. Descriptions of the two developed theories and accompanying design explanations are included.

Research Question One

The first research question for the present study states, “What factors contributed to professional school counselors selecting their career?” Participants expressed numerous influences on their professional trajectories. Both personal and professional factors impacted each individual’s decision to become a school counselor.

Contributions to School Counseling Career Theory (CSCCT)

The Contributions to School Counseling Career Theory (CSCCT) was developed utilizing open coding, focused coding, axial coding, memo writing, and peer debriefing. The data supports three phenomena: (a) experiences leading to desire to help others, (b) connection to the educational setting, and (c) knowledge and positive disposition towards mental health profession.
The theory includes four causal conditions, while three contextual conditions emerged from the data. Additionally, one intervening condition was identified as a factor leading to the phenomena. Each of the conditions is specifically discussed in the following section. A visual representation of the axial coding scheme representing the connection between the conditions and the phenomenon is included (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Visual Representation of the Contributions to School Counseling Career Theory (CSCCT)*

The CSCCT figure includes a bracket framing the three types of conditions. The arrows from the conditions end at a shared point leading to the phenomena. The arrows in the figure represent that the three conditions interact, leading to the phenomenon. No single condition was identified as a direct influence on the phenomenon. The conditions and phenomena are color-coded to show their relationship.
The conditions and phenomena are followed by action. The identified action is described as “completing all requirements to earn a professional school counselor certification.” That includes: (a) applying for and being accepted into graduate school, (b) completing all academic requirements, (c) passing licensure exams, and (d) completing certification paperwork. Additionally, “signing a professional school counseling contract” is identified as an action, as in order for the consequence of “work as a professional school counselor” to transpire, being hired for a position must first occur. Table 3 below identifies the conditions influencing the phenomena by participant.

**Table 3**

*Identified Conditions Influencing Phenomena of CSCCT by Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Blake</th>
<th>Camy</th>
<th>Cynthia</th>
<th>Daniela</th>
<th>Debra</th>
<th>Elisa</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>Geri</th>
<th>Hellen</th>
<th>Janice</th>
<th>Krystal</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Lydia</th>
<th>Maggie</th>
<th>Marcus</th>
<th>Monica</th>
<th>Paul</th>
<th>Sandy</th>
<th>Stephen</th>
<th>Theresa</th>
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Experiences Leading to Desire to Help Others

One element of the CSCCT is “experiences leading to desire to help others.” Three codes emerged as conditions leading to this phenomenon: (a) caretakers, (b) change agents, and (c) influential prior professional experiences. Of the 21 participants, 11 individuals (52%) described themselves as caretakers, while seven of the 21 participants (33%) described elements of being a change agent. Influential prior experiences were shared by 14 (67%) of the 21 participants. Figure 3 reflects the axial coding model leading to the phenomenon of “experiences leading to desire to help others.”

Figure 3
Axial Coding Model, Experiences Leading to Desire to Help Others
**Caretakers**

At 14, Daniela’s parents divorced, a process she described as “messy and difficult.” The divorce caused strife between Daniela and her mom, resulting in her being kicked out of the home while still in high school. Despite the tumultuous living situation, her siblings stayed with her mother but looked to Daniela for support. “My siblings stayed with her, but they definitely relied on me for emotional support…when something went wrong with our mom, I was the one who spoke up; I was their advocate…now everyone says I’m the matriarch in my family.” When asked to elaborate on what “advocate” means to her, Daniela stated that she felt responsible to the role of speaking up for her siblings, protecting their interests, and supporting their emotional wellbeing. She summarized by saying she felt like a caretaker but from a distance. Now into adulthood, she is still close with her siblings and supports their academic and personal growth.

Lydia recalled her adolescence and the experiences shared with her friends throughout their K-12 education. Beginning in elementary school, Lydia commonly was bullied. Her reserved demeanor made her an ongoing target, continuing into high school. When she learned that one of her friends was also experiencing bullying, her lack of support encouraged her to take a more active role in helping her friend. “…A friend experienced it (bullying), too, so I checked on her and gave her a support system…I’d been where she was, and I knew how it felt. I didn’t want anyone to go through that alone like I did.” She continued to share that she felt like it was her responsibility to provide care to her friends, as not many people were aware of what they were experiencing.

Paul was asked if he took on the caretaker role for anyone in his family as part of a follow-up interview in the secondary data collection process. He shared that his younger sister
can get “flustered” and often looks to him to help her navigate challenging situations. As a teenager, Paul helped her academically and socially. Now as adults, she still depends on him to help with situations. “She’s 26, but I still need to support her at times.” He continued by stating, “I’ve always made sure she has the things she needs to be successful.” Tasks such as searching for and securing employment, looking to him for advice when facing a difficult decision, and even “simple everyday tasks” are examples of ways Paul continues to care for his sister.

**Change Agents**

Over the course of her academic career, Lydia and her friends endured bullying from their peers. While she acknowledges that the issue of bullying is receiving more attention now than it did when she was in school, she is driven to keep the topic at the forefront of public education. In fact, Lydia stated that a major motivation for selecting the school counseling profession was to address the bullying issues in the school system. She specified that while she enjoys working with students who experience bullying, she is committed to working with students who bully so that they can learn to treat others differently and amend their patterns of hurtful behavior.

Paul shared that an important role to him in working with high school students is inspired by individuals who he met at the Air Force Base in his community. “We had Officers from all over the place…they’re all here to do the same thing, but their stories are vastly different.” That reflection made Paul realize he could change a common narrative shared throughout his community, “Once you’re here, you never leave.” He uses the stories he heard from the Officers he’s met at the base to inspire his students to think about what options are available outside of
the community. He encourages his students to break the cycle of never leaving by telling them, “...you never know what college is going to bring you. You never know what opportunity you may find just by taking the step to leave where you’re from.”

**Influential Prior Professional Experiences**

Daniela described herself as a “long-term planner” and that all her decisions are done after careful analysis and with intention. After graduating with her undergraduate degree at the age of 20, she decided to take a year to “live life” and pursue personal opportunities such as traveling and professional opportunities such as working in the restaurant industry. Daniela describes the job as a very meaningful position to her, becoming close with the owners of the restaurant, who she referred to as her “second parents.”

She noted that working at a restaurant may seem like an unconventional segue into school counseling. However, many of the experiences working in the restaurant impacted the trajectory of Daniela’s career. While she enjoyed the interpersonal relationships with the staff, talking with the customers was her favorite part of the job. “I’m a highly sensitive person, and I feed off of other people’s energy. At the restaurant, I learned how to read people and know what they’re feeling.” When the owners decided to open a second location, Daniela was asked to lead the training process. She learned that she thrived in teaching the staff how to connect with others. She shared that many of her customers would comment about how clear it was that Daniela loved her job. Now as a professional school counselor, Daniela translates those skills and enjoyment into her work with students and families.
After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in Business Management and Leadership, Lydia felt burned out from being in school. Rather than beginning a master’s program in school counseling immediately, she elected to work for a few years first. She worked various jobs, but her experience at a call center was particularly influential. She described the job as “absolutely the worst job I ever had.” Lydia elaborated by sharing that a major issue with the position is that it lacked the opportunity for her to help others. “I was just doing careers I didn’t like, and it was affecting every part of my life. So, it gave me the push to get the ball rolling on my future as a school counselor.”

Paul shared that he has had a job ever since he received his driver’s license at age 16. He held some positions to make ends meet, but his position at the nearby Air Force Base was an influential job in his career journey. He worked as a US government civilian servant, initially as a recreation assistant renting boats and kayaks. He worked his way through the system, eventually becoming the manager of beach recreational operations and overseeing a renovation of the facility. Paul went on to share that what inspired him in that job was the vast number of individuals he met. “The military is the largest workforce program in the world, so I got to train and meet people from all over…I loved hearing their stories and learning about their lives.” Paul particularly enjoyed getting to know cadets at their first command post as they were enthusiastic and curious about where opportunities may take them. “Without my job on the base, I wouldn’t have known how much I enjoy learning the stories of other people and listening to where they aspire to be.”
Connection to the Educational Setting

A second element of the CSCCT is “connection to the education setting.” Two codes emerged as conditions leading to the phenomenon: (a) exposure to education undergraduate courses and (b) desire to work with children and adolescents. Ten (48%) of the 21 participants shared that they had been exposed to undergraduate classes, whereas 16 individuals (76%) expressed a desire to work with children and adolescents. Figure 4 reflects the axial coding model leading to the phenomenon of “connection to the education setting.”

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4**

*Axial Coding Model, Connection to the Educational Setting*

**Exposure to Undergraduate Education Courses**

Upon graduating high school, Lydia enrolled at a small liberal arts institution in the Midwest. She initially enrolled as an education major, completing multiple prerequisite courses to enter the education program. What initially drew her to education was her own K-12 journey. “I was well aware of the people who saw me and gave me their time, not just my teacher. So, I was aware of the impact people could make on students, so I thought about becoming a teacher.” However, she shared that while she was drawn to the school setting, she discovered that teaching was not the right fit for her. “...I felt like teaching was never a good fit. It may have been that...
there was no subject I was passionate enough about to want to teach every day,” she stated. Additionally, Lydia discovered the repetition of teaching was not conducive to her personality, as she enjoys the challenge of being placed in different scenarios and problem-solving. “I needed a position that allowed me to do a variety of different things every day.” It was in that reflection that her curiosity about the school counseling profession was piqued. “School counseling lets me explore career counseling, academic counseling, and social-emotional counseling. That to me is a better fit.”

**Desire to Work with Children and Adolescents**

The difficult circumstances Daniela faced in her childhood inspired her to choose a career working with children and adolescents. “I never felt like I had my adult people...getting kicked out of the house and things like that when I was younger, I just wanted to create hope and possibilities for kids as an adult.” Daniela continued to share that the maternal role she took on with her siblings inspired her to pursue a career working with youths. “I learned from my siblings that kids are seeking control, they feel so out of control sometimes. I wanted to help kids reframe and help them feel in control.” As an adult, reflecting on the familial strife she experienced continues to drive her work with children and adolescents. “I can’t be every kid’s person, and I struggle with that. But I remind myself that my job is to help as many kids as possible, and I feel good about that.”

In college, Lydia worked as an orientation leader at her university. The position entailed supporting incoming students and families as the students transitioned into on-campus housing. “That’s where I fell in love with working with students and helping them and their families just
get accustomed to college life.” The connections she made with students and the ongoing relationships she maintained were a large contribution to her career path. In fact, initially, Lydia considered pursuing a career in college advising rather than school counseling. However, when she reflected on what mattered to her in a career, she wanted to impact the lives of individuals while they were still young. “As a college counselor, I would be working with ‘little adults’, they’ve already made a lot of decisions and are starting a life on their own. I wanted to get to students before they get to that point.”

When Paul first began his college career, he wanted to pursue a career in youth ministry. “I wanted to help teenagers find their purpose,” he stated. After taking a world religions course as an undergraduate, he discovered that pastoral work was not what he wanted to pursue. However, upon reflecting on the elements that excited him about a career in ministry, he discovered what was driving towards passion for helping adolescents. Paul recognized that many adolescents are uncomfortable talking to adults when they are in need of emotional support. Rather than supporting them through ministry work, Paul decided to explore how he may be able to help adolescents through a career in counseling. “It’s weird, but a Venn Diagram of a youth pastor and counselor have a lot of overlap. When I realized that, I noticed that a lot of what I do naturally with kids may lead me to a different career path than I thought.”

**Knowledge and Positive Disposition Towards Mental Health Care**

A third element of the CSCCT is “knowledge and positive disposition towards the mental health profession.” Three different codes emerged as conditions: (a) psychology undergraduate major, (b) personal experience with clinical mental health counselors, and (c) personal
experience with school counselors. Nine participants (43%) shared that their undergraduate
major was psychology. Of the 21 participants, 10 (48%) expressed having a personal experience
with a clinical mental health counselor while eight (38%) shared having experiences with a
school counselor. Figure 5 reflects the axial coding model leading to the phenomenon of
“knowledge and positive dispositions towards the mental health profession.”

**Figure 5**
*Axial Coding Model, Knowledge & Positive Disposition Towards Mental Health Profession*

**Psychology Undergraduate Major**

An Introduction to Psychology course taken as an undergraduate sparked Paul’s passion
for the subject. In the course, he learned that “psychology was fundamentally about
understanding human conditions, working towards self-improvement, and helping people.” He
described that his love for psychology continued to grow with each class he took. As he
approached the end of his undergraduate program, he seriously considered a career in mental
health counseling. Initially, Paul considered being a classroom instructor and teaching
psychology but was motivated to use his knowledge of psychology to directly help others. He
had taken note of the mental health crisis in youth and viewed working in the schools as an opportunity to put his psychology background to use. “My inkling to be a school counselor was really driven by going through my psychology program. I trusted my gut and the process, and after six years of schooling, I am exactly where I was supposed to end up.”

**Personal Experiences with Clinical Mental Health Counselors**

Daniela shared that she benefited from professional counseling in early adulthood. Early in college, she began seeing a clinical mental health counselor. She recognized that she would benefit from talking to a professional about the changing roles in her life. “I decided to go to a counselor when I realized how different my roles in life were becoming. I felt hopeless, and they created hope.” Reflecting on how her time as a client impacts her work as a professional school counselor, Daniela shared the personal progress she made inspires her to give the same to her students. “I want to instill the creation of hope and possibility like I had.”

Following her difficult experience as a K-12 student, Lydia sought out professional counseling. Lydia described that in high school, she was very reserved, making her reluctant to reach out for help. Her parents were not even aware of how severe the bullying she was experiencing had become. However, she recognized that some help from a professional would have helped her, stating, “I never reached out for help or had anyone to talk to about what was happening, but I knew if I did, it would have been a lot better.” Therefore, when Lydia started college, she decided to make up for the help she lacked in high school. “I have, in my adult life, seen several mental health counselors…I had a great relationship with one counselor in particular. I trusted her.”
Personal Experiences with School Counselors

A close relationship with her school counselor during a difficult time in adolescence made a huge impact on Daniela.

I had a really rough experience with my parent's divorce, and my school counselor was the biggest force that got me out of the funk…she changed my world. She totally changed the trajectory of how I thought about myself and the situation I was in…that experience is a huge part of what drives me in this profession.

Daniela went on to explain that now as a school counselor, she realizes that her school counselor didn’t “…do anything crazy, she was just present with me like we are every day as a school counselor.” Daniela shared that her school counselor was empathetic, patient, and caring, and that Daniela “relied on her for emotional support.” Now as a professional school counselor, Daniela seeks to give that to her students, as well.

In a contrasting experience, Lydia pointed to the absence of a school counselor as a professional influence. Specifically, the isolation she felt as she navigated the hardship of being bullied inspired her to be present and available to her students as a school counselor.

I don’t even know who my school counselors were…I had no support from the school. Even if I had decided to ask for help, I wouldn’t have known who to go to…that’s the one thing that really stands out that made me want to be a school counselor. I don’t want a student to feel alone like I did.

Paul recalls his experience working with his school counselor in a negative light. As Paul described, “My school counselor wasn’t doing anything helpful for me.” A member of a specialized academic program, Paul shared that he only worked with his school counselor once a
year to select courses for the following year’s schedule. Additionally, he shared that he lacked much needed help with college applications and recalls noticing that the focus of the counseling department was supporting students who needed help graduating. “...they were focused on getting the school grade where it needed, so they did a lot of interventions that weren’t for kids in my program, like applying for Bright Futures and stuff.” He continued to share that his negative experience inspired him to want to give more to students. “I put myself in their shoes because I was, and I try to come from the same mentality that I had in school…what I needed and didn’t get.”

Research Question Two

The second research question of the present study states, “During the first 3-5 years of their career, what supports have professional school counselors experienced that contributed to remaining in the profession?” Of the 21 participants interviewed, 18 (86%) stated that, at one point, they had considered leaving the field of school counseling. However, at the time of the interview, they were all still working as professional school counselors.

Retention of School Counselors Theory (RSCT)

Open coding, focused coding, axial coding, memo writing, and peer debriefing were utilized to develop the Retention of School Counselor Theory (RSCT). Figure 6 below provides a visual representation of the theory. Three conditions leading to the phenomenon of school counselors leaving the field, followed by the mechanisms supported by the data analysis that leads to the consequence of remaining in the field of school counseling. Unlike the CSCCT where the data lead to the emergence of the phenomena as the primary findings, the data
supporting the RSCT lead to the emergence of mechanisms leading to the consequence as the primary findings.

The identified casual condition was the participant’s perception of a low salary. The contextual condition pertained to being assigned professional tasks by an administrator which the participants discerned as inappropriate for the school counseling position. Two topics emerged as intervening conditions. The impact of COVID-19 was commonly discussed as an influence on professional dissatisfaction. Furthermore, some participants stated that they had been, or were currently, looking for a position outside of school counseling but were unsuccessful in finding an open position that interested them.

**Figure 6**

*Visual Representation of the Retention of School Counselors Theory (RSCT)*

In the figure, a bracket frames the three individual conditions, and the arrows converge at one central point leading to the phenomenon. These design elements represent the interplay of the three conditions, rather than any single condition functioning in isolation.
The conditions and phenomenon are followed by the emergence of the mechanism. Three codes emerged in the theory: (a) relationship with students, (b) mutual respect with administrators, and (c) relationship with colleagues. Of the 21 participants, 18 individuals (86%) described the role of relationships as a means of retention. Eighteen participants (85%) described positive relationships with administrators, whereas 13 (72%) shared the role of positive relationships with colleagues on retention. These codes were identified as leading to the consequence of participants remaining in the school counseling profession for at least three years. Table 4 below identifies the emergent mechanism by participant, followed by exemplar examples of the emergent codes from participants Daniela, Lydia, and Paul.

### Table 4

*Emergence of Identified Mechanisms of RSCT by Participant*

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### Relationship with Students

Throughout the interviews, feelings of frustration with the position were expressed by many participants. Of the 21 individuals interviewed, 18 (86%) shared that they had seriously
considered changing careers at one point. However, when asked about supports that influenced the participants to stay in the field, the impact of the students was commonly discussed. Building relationships with students to help them succeed, overcome barriers, and foster growth and potential was pivotal in the decision to remain in the field.

Daniela shared that she has considered leaving the profession and actively sought other positions over the summer. The transitions during COVID-19 and the difficulty returning to school had taken a toll on Daniela, and she felt like it may be time for a change. Positions she was considering included moving to private practice, academic advising at a local community college, and admissions at a local university. However, so far, she has decided to remain in the profession.

One element that Daniela most enjoys about working with adolescents is her daily interactions. A professional priority for Daniela is to be active and present across the school campus and has noticed an improvement in her relationships. “I get to see every facet of them, like seeing them every single day, they are so much more willing to open up to me now.” She expressed that she values her work, and she feels fulfilled by the progress she assists her students in making. “The impact that I have in being consistently there for these kids is huge. I love them and care for them and want them to be successful.” For the first time this year, Daniela decided to coach soccer as a way to connect with students. She shared that when she considered going into private practice she reflected on her relationships with students which swayed her decision to stay. “I’m going to have the most impact, the best relationships, with kids working at a school.”
Like many other participants, Lydia expressed that she has considered leaving the field of school counseling. She elaborated that her biggest frustration with the position relates to the low wage and that as a single person, it can be difficult to support herself financially on a school counselor's salary. Her financial concerns have led her to look for other positions. However, Lydia shared that when she does look “…nothing interests me. I just want to be a school counselor.”

One of the reasons Lydia chooses not to leave the profession is her passion for helping others, and her lack of interest in “…climbing the corporate ladder.” She shared that her main professional focus is on working with students and utilizing her counseling skills. Lydia specifically referenced how important it is to her to be empathetic towards families when they’re experiencing a difficult time. “I could find a different job to make more money, but when I help families in difficult situations, I am incredibly happy in my job.”

When asked if he’s ever considered leaving the field of school counseling, Paul reluctantly shared that he had. As he elaborated, he stated that thinking about changing careers has always been a reflection of frustrations he’s felt about policies and procedures determined by the district office or administrators. “..we've been told how to do our jobs properly by someone who has never stepped foot in our positions, and that is incredibly frustrating.” However, he followed up by sharing that even though he often feels frustrated, the relationship he has with students continues to drive him. “Helping students reach their true potential and future desires and making sure there is nothing in their way does bring a lot of joy to my position….knowing I can help students reach that is what keeps me here.” He went on to describe how when he’s considered other career paths, he recalls the unique position he is in as a school counselor.
“...school counselors get to relish in the success of students. We go to graduation, we get to see these kids get accepted to college, we get to witness them overcoming obstacles…it’s a very special part of our job.”

**Mutual Respect with Administrators**

Daniela experienced a high level of burnout upon returning to in-person learning at the middle school where she was working. She indicated that not only was it difficult to meet the needs of the students and families, but she felt the lack of support from administrators impacted her work. “The amount of support I was given at my first school was basically nonexistent. So, when we came back from quarantine, I burned out quickly.” At that point, Daniela considered leaving the field altogether as she did not feel respected or valued by the campus administration. After talking with her mentor, rather than leaving the field, she decided to pursue a position as a school counselor at a different school the next year.

Now at a high school, Daniela is grateful for her relationship with the campus administrators. In addition, she shared that she has found shared values and that the counseling department and administrative team work together towards shared goals. “I decided in order to stay in the field, I needed to find a supportive environment, and I did. The administration is really supportive, relational people with good hearts. I know we are all moving in the same direction.”

Difficult conversations were noted by Lydia as one area of stress in her position. She noted that particularly as a newer school counselor, at times she was intimidated by parents/caregivers when angry. However, she has always felt comfortable reaching out to her
administrator for help. “If I need him in a meeting because I have an angry parent, he’s more than happy to be there and back me up. So, I’m not getting thrown into a volatile situation on my own.” Lydia pointed to the availability and responsiveness of her administration team as an important support. She specifically noted that she is grateful that her administrator keeps open lines of communication and is readily available should she need to contact him. “He’s really responsive. He’s always available via text or email…he makes school counseling easier because I know I have his support.”

One of the professional frustrations felt by Paul related to the lack of support from previous administrators. In his fourth year as a school counselor, Paul is working under his fourth administrator. “I’ve seen administrators come and go, some who almost had an anti-counseling point of view…that was really eating away at me and interfering with my work.” Paul continued to share that his frustration with prior principals centered a lot on the lack of understanding about what school counselors can be doing, and some of the incoming administrators were not receptive to hearing what had been working well. “… every time we got a new admin there was pressure to do more and to do it differently. But we had some things in place that were working well, but they didn’t listen to what was successful.”

Now, Paul and his colleagues work alongside a new administrator who has open lines of communication and respect for the counseling department. “He’s listening to what we need, what we can do, and what we view as our direction.” An example Paul shared was when the counseling department needed to reallocate caseloads between the counselors.

He talked to our department and asked us what we were interested in taking on…I was interested in academic programs so he assigned IB (International Baccalaureate) to me.
Instead of telling us what was going to happen, he included us in the decision making process.

The culmination of the support Paul receives from administration allows him to be successful at his job. “...we’re dealing with mental health, we’re doing classroom lessons, we’re leading groups, and that’s what I’ve wanted to do in my job…my admin supports that.”

**Relationship With Colleagues**

The school where Lydia works is the same school where she completed her professional internship. She shared that beginning her career with coworkers she already had a relationship which was helpful in her professional development as well as their cohesion as a department. Another benefit of being hired at her internship site is that her site supervisor then became her colleague. “My now co-worker was my internship supervisor, so I was really connected to her…she’s been a great support person.”

Lydia recognized the benefits of working with a team of veteran counselors. “Part of what makes us a good team is all my coworkers have been counselors for a number of years. When I’m not sure how to handle something, they mentor me and we bounce ideas off each other.” Additionally, the collaborative approach of the department has been a factor in Lydia’s job satisfaction. “We do weekly check-ins as a department and make sure everyone is doing well and everything is going okay…we have a great team.”

Having cohesion and shared goals have played an important part in Paul’s work as a school counselor. He shared that the year he was hired, two additional counselors were hired. It was his first year in the field, and the other two new counselors had no experience working in the
high school setting. They all quickly realized that they were going to need to lean on each other as they learned the job together. “We realized we all brought in different strengths and that we were going to have to work together, so it was a learning year.” Now, working closely with his colleagues has changed from a necessity to a choice. “...now that I’m four years in, I know a little bit more, but the relationships I’ve created with my coworkers, that’s a main reason I’m still here.”

Conclusion

The preceding chapter presented the findings of the study. Specifically, the emerging codes related to the factors influencing the recruitment and retention of professional school counselors were identified with accompanying supporting data. Twenty-one unique participants who meet the inclusion criteria were interview for this study. Upon completing the data analysis process, including memo writing, initial, focused, and axial coding, peer debriefing, and fidelity checks, two developmental theories emerged, the Contributions to School Counselor Career Theory (CSCCT), and the Retention of School Counselors Theory (RSCT).

The subsequent chapter, chapter five, will focus on furthering the discussion of the study findings. The relationship between the findings of the developmental theories, and current research will be explored. Additionally, chapter five includes suggestions for future research and outlines the limitations of the study. A final reflection completes the chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The focus of chapter five is to discuss the findings of the present study. In particular, this chapter will highlight the codes, present implications for the field, discuss the study's limitations, and highlight how the study can contribute to the educational and scholarly landscapes. Also included in this chapter is a final reflection. Thoughts regarding the learning process related to study development, execution, and professional growth are shared.

Study Summary

The present study aims to theorize the factors contributing to the recruitment and retention of school counselors. Additionally, the study theorizes the supports leading to the retention of professional school counselors for at least three years. A constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) methodology was utilized to develop theories related to the associated research questions. Data was collected via interviews with 21 individual participants using a semi-structured interview protocol. Five participants completed a follow-up discussion to clarify information. The resulting theories, the Contributions to School Counseling Career Theory (CSCCT) and the Retention of School Counselor Theory (RSCT), were developed following the completion of the open, focused, and axial coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021), along with continuous memo writing and reflexivity.
Discussion of the Findings: Research Question One

Research question one states: What factors contributed to professional school counselors selecting their career? The conditions and phenomena are provided, and existing related research is reviewed.

Findings Relevant to Experiences Leading to Desire to Help Others

Experiences leading to a desire to help others emerged as a phenomenon of the CSCCT. Three codes emerged as conditions leading to the phenomenon: (a) caretakers, (b) change agents, and (c) influential prior professional experiences. Existing literature supporting the developmental theory is provided by code.

Caretakers

Roles are described as individuals' positions in social contexts, including families and friendships (Macmillian & Copher, 2005). Expected behaviors, routines, and social norms are often embedded in individuals' roles (Parsons & Shils, 1951; Stryker, 1980). Experiences may impact roles, as individuals can move from one role to another in response to a situation or change (Macmillian & Copher, 2005). Within the scope of family dynamics, caretakers who are family members are often individuals who can provide the most support to other family members in need (Nolan & Grant, 1989, Ruddle et a., 1997). Specifically, caretakers are described as the family members whom others would want to make decisions on their behalf (Feinberg & Whitlatch, 2002). Friendships serve as an opportunity for individuals to discover new identities and roles and receive affirmation from others (Crosnoe, 2000). In doing so, youth become aware
of their roles in a friend group and learn their responsibilities and social positioning (Crosnoe, 2000; Thomas et al., 2020).

The findings of the study are supported by existing research related to caretaking. Some participants described identifying as caretakers early in life. Others explained that the caretaking role developed due to a life change (i.e., parents’ divorce). Further, participants indicated whether they assumed the caretaker role within their family structure or friendships. Despite being viewed distinctly by participants within their experiences, the shared understanding of caretaking in the family and friendship dynamics were prominent personality characteristics that may have influenced career trajectories toward school counseling.

**Change Agents**

In human resources, a “change agent” is an official role given to an individual responsible for creating change within a professional organization (Ulrich, 1997). More broadly, change agents are viewed as individuals who are personally driven to disrupt the norm and impact change from within a system (Vähäsantanen, 2013; van der Heijden et al., 2016). The personality trait of being a change agent is particularly impactful in individuals who are educators (van der Heijden et al., 2016). Educators as change agents see their role in making a difference in students' lives and initiating actions in the classroom and within relationships to improve students’ lives and learning beyond the classroom setting (Galluzzo, 2011; Hattie, 2012). The findings coincide with the previous research, as participants shared that personal life experiences played a part in their decision to pursue a career in professional school counseling. Encouragement to break the cycle of poverty and delinquency, support for experiencing life in a
new community, and addressing maladaptive behaviors were areas where participants expressed a desire to influence change.

**Influential Prior Professional Experiences**

Developed in 1969 by Super, the self-concept theory of career development views career choice as a reflection of self-concept (Leung, 2008). Vocational and self-concept development are similar in that both include aptitudes, social influences, desired roles, and neural and endocrine makeup (Leung, 2008; Super, 1953). Super (1963) later further developed the theory by defining vocational self-concept as “The constellation of self-attributes considered by the individual to be vocationally relevant” (p. 20). Thus, the relationship between self-concept and occupation satisfaction lies in the congruence between career roles and how that leads to the satisfaction of one’s ideal self (Betz, 1994).

Career satisfaction is an individual’s subjective evaluation of career success (Chang et al., 2020). Subject evaluations include fulfillment, personal growth, societal contributions, and social relationships (Chadi & Hetschko, 2017). Within the present study, participants held various positions before entering the school counseling profession. Participants' previous careers or jobs include athletic coach, college advisor, restaurant manager, classroom teacher, hair stylist, real estate agent, and juvenile probation officer. While the jobs varied, the impact of the previously held positions was similar. As supported by self-concept theory of career development (Super, 1953), the need for a personally fulfilling job was a consistent message among participants. Some recognized this need by holding positions that lacked job satisfaction. Others had positions that provided elements of satisfaction but promoted deeper reflection into a desire to be a school
counselor. Overall, previous professional experiences shaped many participants’ motivations to pursue a career in school counseling.

**Connection to the Educational Setting**

A second phenomenon of the CSCCT emerging from the data was “connection to the educational setting.” Two specific conditions contribute to the phenomena: (a) exposure to education undergraduate courses and (b) desire to work with children and adolescents. Existing literature supporting the theory is provided by code.

**Exposure to Undergraduate Education Courses**

Different factors have been found to motivate individuals to pursue a career in education (Johnson & Kardos, 2008; Heinz, 2014; Watt et al., 2012). A desire to contribute to the betterment of society, a passion for a particular subject area, high self-efficacy in teaching abilities, and positive prior learning experiences have all been found to influence undergraduate education majors to enter the field (Heinz, 2014). However, 37% of students who declare education as their major change their field of study to a non-education field during their undergraduate education (NCES, 2017). That ranks education as the field with the third highest number of students who leave the major, behind only mathematics and humanities (NCES, 2017). Issues such as controlling problematic student behaviors, low salaries with no annual raises, and disconnection between classrooms and administration have been recognized as factors influencing education majors to change their study area (Gonzalez et al., 2008).

Of the 21 participants, 10 (48%) shared that they enrolled in education courses for at least one full school year during their undergraduate studies. For most, enrolling in education courses
led to the realization that being full-time in the classroom was not their career of choice. Some completed their education degree and held careers as teachers before pursuing their master’s in school counseling. Consistent with current research, participants described frustrations with classroom management, a lack of interest in a particular content area, and frustrations with teaching policies are some reasons for leaving education as their area of study or career.

**Desire to Work with Children and Adolescents**

As noted by Lortie (2002), one of the most substantial attractors to the field of education is “a desire to work with young people” (p. 27). Similar findings have emerged from additional research, stating that an influence to work with young people is driven by altruistic influences (Brown, 1992; Heinz, 2015; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Tudhope, 1944; Valentine, 1934; Wong et al., 2014). Aspiring to work with youths as a factor contributing to pursuing a career in education is more prevalent among elementary school educators than secondary school educators (Heinz, 2015; Moran et al., 2001). While secondary educators may be motivated by a desire to work with children and adolescents, generally, the most prominent driver of pursuing a degree in secondary education is a passion for a particular subject area (Heinz, 2015; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Moran et al., 2001).

The current study's findings support the established and thoroughly researched topic related to the influence of working with children and adolescents for entering the education field. Overall, 76% of participants indicated that working with children and adolescents was a motivator for pursuing a career in school counseling. The research indicates that educators at the elementary school level were more motivated by altruistic factors (Heinz, 2015; Howes &
Goodman-Delahunt, 2015; Moran et al., 2001) compared to secondary instructors. However, the current study's findings do not entirely align with current research. Eighty percent of participants at the secondary level (9-12) and 80% of school counselors working at the primary level (K-8) indicated that working with youths was a driver for selecting the school counseling profession. However, it should be considered that school counselors do not specialize in a particular academic subject as secondary classroom teachers do. Therefore, the role of passion for a subject area in pursuing a career as a secondary classroom teacher does not apply to secondary school counselors.

Knowledge and Positive Disposition of Mental Health Profession

Three codes emerged as contextual factors related to “knowledge and positive dispositions of mental health professionals” as part of the CSCCT. The three codes: (a) psychology undergraduate major, (b) personal experience with clinical mental health counselors, and (b) personal experience with school counselors, are individually addressed below. Existing research and its relevance to the findings are discussed.

Psychology Undergraduate Major

Earning an undergraduate degree in psychology is common throughout higher education (Halonen, 2011). Psychology is among the top three most popular majors for entering first-year students and degree conferrals (Halonen, 2011). According to the American Psychological Association (2022), in 2021, 134,407 bachelor's degrees in psychology were awarded from institutions in the United States. More than 2 million psychology bachelor’s degrees were awarded between 1,641 different institutions from 2004-2021 (APA, 2022). Of institutions in the
United States, the University of Central Florida has awarded the most psychology bachelor’s degrees between 2004-2021, conferring 18,214 degrees (APA, 2022). Further, more than 25% of students with undergraduate degrees in psychology pursue a master’s degree in psychology or related fields, such as counseling (Lin et al., 2017).

Of the 21 individuals participating in the present study, 10 (48%) completed their bachelor’s degree in psychology. Therefore, psychology was the most common undergraduate degree earned amongst the participants. That is supported by the existing research indicating the popularity of psychology as an undergraduate degree. Additionally, existing research indicates that it is not uncommon for psychology undergraduates to pursue a master’s degree. Therefore, the CSCCT includes a psychology undergraduate major as an influence for selecting the school counseling profession. As previously noted, earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology is commonplace. Thus, existing research and the present study's findings indicate that psychology programs may be an advantageous avenue for school counseling programs to recruit potential students.

*Personal Experience with Clinical Mental Health Counselors*

There continues to be a stigma associated with seeking counseling services (Kakhnovets, 2011). However, research indicates that education regarding mental health concerns and counseling has been shown to increase help-seeking behaviors (Bhugra & Hicks, 2004). Specifically, education focused on dispelling myths and combating the stigma associated with receiving counseling services may lead to a positive outlook on seeking counseling services (Bhugra & Hicks, 2004; Sharp et al., 2006). Finally, individuals with a positive experience with
counseling tend to be more likely to seek help in the future and promote mental health care to others (Kakhnovets, 2011; Vogel & Wester, 2003).

Previous experiences with clinical mental health professionals were referenced as a factor contributing to pursuing a career in school counseling. Some participants sought counseling while facing life transitions such as changes in family dynamics, relocating, or career uncertainty. Others shared stories about seeking help following the loss of a family member or taking on a new role in the family system. Overall, the positive impact on participants who sought counseling when facing difficult times such as life transitions and loss was commonly described as a key influence on pursuing a career in school counseling. Therefore, the findings of the present study align with existing research. The positive experience of receiving mental health counseling was a factor in the participants' decision to promote mental health and wellness to youths by entering a career as a school counselor.

**Personal Experience with School Counselors**

It is recommended that school counselors spend 80% of their time delivering direct services to students (ASCA, 2019a). Individual, small group, and large group classroom lessons allow school counselors to address mental health and wellness, academic planning, and post-secondary goal setting (ASA, 2019a). Through the delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program, a healthy school climate promoting growth and learning can be developed (Cleveland & Sink, 2018; Nassar-McMillan, 2011). In doing so, students may be more likely to describe positive relationships with their school counselor (Cleveland & Sink, 2018). Existing research states that students identified providing counseling services as an essential role of a
school counselor (Gallant & Zhao, 2011; Kuhn, 2004). Additionally, 73% of high school students expressed positive experiences when receiving mental health counseling services from their school counselor (Gallant & Zhao, 2011).

The findings of existing research and this study are congruent. Many participants noted a positive experience with school counselors. Specifically, multiple participants shared that they received mental health support from their school counselor during personal strife, including family transitions, loss, and social difficulties. Thus, many participants shared that the positive experiences were instrumental in their decision to pursue school counseling as a profession.

However, in contradicting research, many students experience dissatisfaction with their school counselor. Students identified a lack of availability and accessibility, minimal social and emotional support, and low academic expectations as issues with their school counselor (Cavos Vela et al., 2023). Further, high school students felt they could not rely on their school counselors and that their school counselors communicated negative messages, which impacted the participants’ willingness to seek help (Vega et al., 2015).

Some participants of the present study expressed dissatisfaction with their school counselor. Emerging mental health issues, persistent bullying, and unmet academic needs were ways that some participants felt they would have benefited from working with their school counselor. Therefore, the findings align with existing research that indicates some students' negative experiences with their school counselors (see Cavos Vela et al., 2023; Vega et al., 2015). Consequently, the lack of support motivated some participants to pursue a career in school counseling.
Discussion of the Findings: Research Question Two

The following section reviews the findings related to research question two. Research question two states: During the first 3-5 years of their career, what supports have professional school counselors experienced that contributed to remaining in the profession? Existing data and its relevance to the findings are explored.

Relationships with Students

There is a plethora of existing research related to the impact that school counselors have on student success (Boulden & Schimmel, 2021; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Collins, 2014; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Lapan et al., 2001; Nassar-McMillan, 2011; Pincus et al., 2020; Rowley, 2000; Warren et al., 2020). As noted above, there is an abundance of existing research related to the desire to work with children and adolescents as an influence for entering the education profession (Brown, 1992; Heinz, 2015; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Tudhope, 1944; Valentine, 1934; Wong et al., 2014). School counselors often make extensive efforts to establish relationships with students on their caseloads (Coogan & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). However, it can be extremely difficult as school counselors face challenges such as high caseloads and minimal resources, impacting relationships (Lee, 2005; Vega et al., 2015).

Research has been conducted regarding the importance of the student-educator relationship (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2018; Kennedy & Haydon, 2021; Poulou, 2017; Sutherland et al., 2019). A “high-quality” relationship between students and educators is typically determined by quality interactions (Kennedy & Haydon, 2021). Quality interactions typically include reciprocal communication (Cook et al., 2018), low levels of conflict, and high
levels of closeness and security (Pianta, 2001). Thus, it is advantageous for students to engage in the relationship-building process with educators (Kennedy & Haydon, 2021; Vega et al., 2015). Based on the responses from the study participants, students have a significant impact on school counselors. These are unique findings as research primarily relates to how the school counselor-student relationship positively impacts students (see Brown & Trusty, 2005; Collins, 2014; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Nassar-McMillan, 2011; Pincus et al., 2020; Rowley, 2000; Warren et al., 2020). Thus, the findings contribute a different point of view to the current landscape of school counseling scholarship.

**Mutual Respect with Administrators**

The impact of collaboration between school counselors and administrators is well documented (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Clemens et al., 2009; Dahir et al., 2010; Dollarhide et al., 2007; Duslak & Geiger, 2016; Rock et al., 2017). Feeling supported by school administrators is a predictor of school counselor success and is found to be a protective factor against burnout (Bardhosi et al., 2014; Kim & Lambie, 2018; McConnell et al., 2020). Specifically, a positive working relationship with campus administration is associated with lower turnover and higher job satisfaction among school counselors (Clements et al., 2009). While the roles of school administrators and school counselors may be vastly different, they are interconnected (McConnell et al., 2020). Mutual trust, clear communication, and maintenance of the collaborative relationship create a positive counselor-administrator relationship (Ponec & Brock, 2000).
Existing research regarding positive school counselor-administrator relationships supports the present study's findings. Participants identified a positive working relationship with an administrator as meaningful support. Specifically, participants indicated that they felt respected by their administrators when there were open lines of communication and shared goals. Through those actions and behaviors, participants indicated that they felt their roles were valued, thus leading to job satisfaction and retention.

**Relationships with Colleagues**

A primary reason individuals leave a job may be stress from strained relationships with coworkers (Jasper, 2007; Pitts et al., 2011). Work environments where employees experience camaraderie among their colleagues are often associated with high retention rates (Butler et al., 2015; Pitts et al., 2011). Camaraderie can be created through teamwork, collaboration, and open communication (Nohria et al., 2008). Further, work environments where individuals receive help from their colleagues and assist their colleagues are related to retention (Kooker et al., 2007; Pitts et al., 2011). Productivity and high-level performance are often associated with workplace departments where individuals value relationships with each other (Butler et al., 2015).

The findings of the present study are supported by existing literature. When asked if they had considered leaving the field of school counseling, 86% of participants (18 participants) indicated they had thought about leaving at least once. However, at the time of their interviews, all 21 participants were under professional contracts with a school district in Florida. One attribute of staying in the profession was the relationships with colleagues. Some elementary school counselors who work independently indicated that they had meaningful working
relationships with school counselors at other schools. Many secondary counselors indicated that positive relationships within the counseling department at their school influenced their decision to stay in the profession.

**Implications**

The participants provided insight into professional and personal factors influencing their decision to pursue a career in school counseling. Additional cognizance related to supports influencing retention was shared. The application of the findings can be applied to various educational settings and contexts, including counselor education programs, school districts, and counselor education researchers.

**Implications for Counselor Education Programs**

The present findings of the current study can benefit counselor education programs. An understanding of the relationship between personality and career choice has been studied for decades (Ahmed et al., 2017; Clement, 2014; Hackett & Betz, 1995). Social factors such as family dynamics, interactions with parents/caregivers, and environmental factors may influence an individual’s career choice (Ahmed et al., 2017; Kemboi et al., 2016). Further, psychological factors such as perceptions, beliefs, ideas, and perceptions can impact an individual’s career interests and pursuits (Ahmed et al., 2017; Özen, 2011). However, while academic programs spend significant time developing curricula, hiring faculty, and marketing the program (Bulger et al., 2015), little focus has been given to the thoughtful recruitment of individuals with specific characteristics, backgrounds, skills, and interests (Bulger et al., 2015; Melville, 2009). Additionally, higher education enrollment in the United States has dropped 6% since 2016.
(Copley & Douthett, 2020). As institutions continue to recruit the same shrinking field of potential applicants, it is advantageous to develop more directed marketing strategies (Bulger et al., 2015; Copley & Douthett, 2020).

The findings of research question one can be applied to recruiting efforts to expand school counseling programs. The developmental CSCCT theory suggests certain personality traits and professional experiences may influence an individual’s decision to enter the school counseling profession. Specifically, the findings indicate that it may be advantageous for school counseling programs to recruit students in psychology and education undergraduate programs. Thus, integrating the findings may increase initial enrollment in school counseling programs. It may increase professional retention through thoughtful recruitment possessing personality traits and experiences conducive to the field.

**Implications for School Districts**

Understanding an individual’s motivations to enter the education profession may inform recruitment and retention policies within a school district (Heinz, 2015). Urban school districts can average up to $20,000 on each new educator hire, including expenses accrued through separation, recruitment, hiring, and training (Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Additionally, on average, it takes approximately 42 days to complete hiring a new employee (Navarra, 2022). Applied to a 180-day school year, students could go nearly 23% of the school year without a professional school counselor. Thus, school districts should consider research on the effective retention of professional school counselors.
School districts should consider applying the present study's findings to their recruitment and retention of school counselors efforts. First, school districts should be cognizant of the great impact relationships with students have on professional retention. School districts may consider this fact when making decisions regarding allocations of school counselors across campuses. By hiring more professionals, school counselors have smaller caseloads creating more time for direct student services (Shi & Brown, 2020; Woods & Domina, 2014). That is important as a decreased student-to-school counselor ratio benefits student outcomes and allows for the developing relationship between the school counselor and students, promoting retention.

**Implications for Counselor Education Research**

The skills necessary to conduct qualitative research are similar to skills related to the counseling profession (Hays & Singh, 2012; Singh & Shelton, 2011). Recently, the use of qualitative studies has increased in popularity in counselor education research (Hays et al., 2015). However, counselor education researchers should critically analyze the population studied and the methodologies employed (Hays et al., 2015; Singh & Shelton, 2011; Waakes et al., 2021).

As noted by Hays and colleagues (2015), most qualitative research in counselor education over the last 15 years has focused on general populations rather than individuals directly in the counseling field. While research related to the general population is worthy of study, it may not be as influential in the further development of the professional counseling field (Hays et al., 2015). Further, between 2017 and 2018, over 50% of counselor education dissertations utilized a phenomenological methodology (Waakes et al., 2021).
The present study highlights the importance of researching targeted populations relevant to the further promotion of the counseling field. Due to the specificity of the participants, the findings may directly influence school counseling programs and students in the future. The researcher received an overwhelming number of inquiries from potential participants, indicating that practicing school counselors are interested in participating in studies that advance the profession. It is suggested that counselor educators conducting qualitative research consider expanding beyond phenomenological methodologies to diversify the research landscape.

**Study Limitations**

**Snowball Sampling**

While snowball sampling was the appropriate procedure for recruitment, it is not without limitations (Parker & Scott, 2019; Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Two specific limitations may have impacted the study. First, as it relies on networking, snowball sampling has the potential for sample bias as the participants are not randomly selected (Parker & Scott, 2019). Rather, recruitment is based on existing relationships and connections, creating samples that may not represent the entire population (Marcus et al., 2017). Additionally, snowball sampling has the potential for self-selection bias (Parker & Scott, 2019; Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Individuals who choose to participate in the study may have strong opinions about the study topic, which may lead to bias in the data (Marcus et al., 2017). Therefore, the recruitment process should be considered if applying the findings to broader populations.
Demographics of Participants

A study limitation relates to the participants’ demographic. In 2018-2019, approximately 110,000 school counselors were working in the United States (ASCA, 2020). White female school counselors continue to dominate the profession's demographics, but there is more understanding that diversity among professionals is essential for student success, particularly for students of color (ASCA, 2020; Najaaro, 2002). According to ASCA (2020), 10% of school counselors identify as Black/African American, 5% as Latinx, 3% as two or more races, and 1% as Asian.

The demographics of participants from the present study vary from those statistics. 86% of study participants identified as white/non-Hispanic, which is slightly above the 81% reported by ASCA (2020). Additionally, no study participants identified as Black/African American or Asian. Regarding gender identity, ASCA (2020) reports that 87% of school counselors identify as female, 11% as male, and 1% as third gender/nonbinary. The gender distribution of the present study varies slightly, with 86% female, 14% male, and 0% third gender/non-binary. Sexual orientation demographic information was not collected for this study. Therefore, the findings are limited by the lack of comprehensive representation from all groups in the professional school counselor landscape.

Geographical Location

One limitation of the present study relates to the physical working location of the participants. The inclusion criteria dictated that participants have current professional school counseling certifications in the state of Florida. Recently, school counseling in Florida has faced
significant changes within the school system (FSCA; Florida School Counselor Association, 2021). Hurricanes, extensive flooding, political agendas, legislation, and the response to education during COVID-19 have all created a unique context for school counseling (FSCA, 2021). Thus, applying the findings to school counselors outside of the state of Florida should be cautioned.

**Years of Experience**

One inclusion criterion for the present study states that participants must have at least three years and no more than five years of professional school counseling experience. Thus, an additional limitation relates to the narrow scope of participants' years of experience. Specifically, consideration should be given regarding professional support promoting retention. Should the present study have expanded the inclusion criterion to professional school counselors with additional years of experience, sources of support mentioned by participants of the present study may have been omitted, and, additional sources of support may have been mentioned.

**Impact of COVID-19**

The first COVID-19 stay-at-home orders were issued on March 12, 2020, in New Rochelle, New York (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2020). Soon after, quarantine orders were issued across the United States, closing schools and creating the largest educational disruption in history (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The breadth of impact on students and educators alike due to the pandemic is still unknown (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

Due to the study inclusion criteria, all 21 participants were at least in their third year as professional school counselors when quarantine began. Questions related to COVID-19 and the
transition to online learning were not part of the interview protocol. Thus, the influence of the
pandemic should be considered when reviewing the findings.

Private Schools

According to NCES (2020a), in 2019 - 2020, there were 30,492 private schools serving
grades K-12 in the United States, and in the fall of 2019, more than 4.7 million students in grades
K-12 were enrolled at a private school (NCES, 2020b). Despite a lack of a mandate requiring
school counselors in private schools, an estimated 7% of professional school counselors reported
working at a private school in 2020 (ASCA, 2021).

One limitation of the present study is that all 21 participants were employed at public
schools at the time of the interview. The demands on school counselors at private schools versus
public schools are different. For example, the average caseload for school counselors at private
schools is less than 140, while 20 participants (95%) of the present study reported a caseload of
no less than 350 students. Cogitation regarding applying the findings to school counselors
working in private schools is recommended.

Suggestions for Future Research

The present study developed a grounded theory about the personal and professional
influences of school counselors entering and remaining in the profession. While it addresses a
gap in the literature, additional questions and areas of study emerged. Therefore, the following
are suggestions for areas of future research related to the findings that may be explored.
Theory Testing Through Theoretical Sampling

The theories that emerged from this study are developmental in nature. Therefore, further study of the theories is suggested. Constant comparison was utilized throughout the data analysis process and phases of coding, resulting in amending of interview questions to test emerging theories. While this approach helped refine initial codes, further testing of the developmental theories is necessary.

Utilizing a theoretical sample approach, the theories can be refined by seeking disconfirming data (Charmaz, 2014). For example, the CSCCT can be further tested by interviewing participants who align with the phenomena but did not choose the school counseling profession. The study of participants who align with the RSCT but chose to leave the field should be studied. Through the disconfirming process, the theories will become more refined. Specifically, the theories should be further tested to understand how school counselors identifying as minoritized populations, including school counselors of color, professionals with diverse gender identities, and school counselors with diverse sexual orientations, should be studied.

School Counselors of Color

Upon completing the aforementioned research pertaining to the application of the theories to diverse populations, the refined CSCCT theory could be utilized to recruit diverse individuals to enter the field of school counseling. In 2018, students of color comprised approximately 52% of public school enrollment (McFarland et al., 2018). However, the number of school counselors of color is disproportionately low compared to the student population.
Recruitment efforts at predominantly White institutions in the United States often have majority representation in education-related academic programs (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Therefore, future research may include applying the present findings of the current study specifically to professional school counselors of color. A replica study mirroring the methodological approach, interview questions, and coding process, with participation criteria, focused on school counselors of color would advance counselor education literature.

**Pre-Service & Current Classroom Teachers**

The present findings of the current study indicate that individuals interested in working in the K-12 setting often pursue the school counseling profession. Some participants previously held careers as classroom teachers, while others studied education as undergraduates. Thus, a suggestion for future research relates to surveying pre-service teachers and current classroom teachers. A longitudinal study could be employed with pre-service teachers during their coursework to assess their interest in the school counseling profession.

The first survey could be given in the participants’ first education program course. A follow-up survey could then be given during pre-internship and finally before graduation. Throughout the study, participants could receive education and the role of a school counselor from in-class lessons and active learning opportunities throughout their practicum and internship experiences. Classroom teachers could participate in a similar longitudinal study during a school year. Suggested instrumentation includes an amended version of the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (Scarborough, 2005). The scale was developed to collect actual and preferred job
duties of practicing school counselors (Scarborough, 2005). Thus, an amended version could be used to gauge pre-service teachers’ interest in completing the tasks addressed in the survey.

**Ethnographic Study of School Counseling Departments**

Based on the present findings of the current study, one area of future research relates to developing cohesive and supportive school counseling departments. Many participants stated that their relationships with colleagues were a primary factor related to professional retention. Thus, it is suggested that future research focuses on understanding the dynamics of a department composed of professionals who feel supported. An ethnographic study is suggested as a possible research design.

Ethnography is a methodology in which the researcher immerses themselves in a specific group to understand the cultural dynamics within the natural context. The researcher observes behaviors, discerns communication, and asks questions about the systems of the group culture (Bryman, 2016). The methodological approach has been used to study workplace dynamics, including understanding relationships that contribute to culture shaping in the workplace (Hopkinson & Wiegand, 2017; Lemaire et al., 2017; Rogers, 2017). Ethnography has been utilized to explore ethos in the school setting (Chang, 2022; Clark, 2019; Moolman, 2020; Susanto & Nanda, 2018). Thus, an ethnographic study should be considered to explore the culture of school counseling departments with high morale. The findings may be implemented to improve camaraderie among school counseling colleagues, leading to job satisfaction and retention.
Impact of Student Relationships on Job Satisfaction

School counseling-related research has a significant focus on the positive impact that school counselors have on students (Boulden & Schimmel, 2021; Brown & Trusty, 2005; Collins, 2014; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Lapan et al., 2001; Nassar-McMillan, 2011; Pincus et al., 2020; Rowley, 2000; Warren et al., 2020). Research with such a focus benefits professional advocacy efforts with states, school districts, and individual campus administrators (Havlik et al., 2019; Wilder, 2019) and warrants continued study.

The findings of the current study suggest that school counselors view relationships with students as an influence for remaining in the field. Therefore, it is mutually beneficial for school counselor-student relationships to grow. Existing research shows that positive relationships between educators and students are developed through meaningful interactions (Kennedy & Haydon, 2021). Thus, future research exploring the relationship between direct student services, the school counselor-student relationship, and professional retention should be considered.

Conclusion

Chapter five serves as the concluding chapter of the present study. The developed theories were presented, along with discussion points such as findings and related literature. Implications for counselor education programs, school districts, and educational researchers were included. The study provides information on a new area of academic research, specifically theorizing elements leading to the selection of the school counseling profession, as well as a theory related to supports leading to the recruitment of school counselors. Suggestions for further
research and limitations to the study were included in chapter five. Below is a reflection regarding the personal and professional impact of the dissertation process on the researcher.

**Personal Reflection**

I am glad to have gone through the process of writing a dissertation. It has taught me how patience, focus, persistence, and stamina all impact completing quality work. Some of the findings of the current study feel like ideas that have already been presented, and others feel fresh and new. However, the culmination of the common experiences and thoughts of participants leads to the development of theories that may directly influence the field. I look forward to publishing my work and sharing the data with others who may benefit. I have an overwhelming sense that all this process has done is fuel my curiosity even further. Some of my answers have been answered, but most of all, this study entices me to think even deeper about how I can contribute to the field of professional school counseling.
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL
**EXEMPTION DETERMINATION**

October 19, 2022

Dear Kathryn Babb:

On 10/19/2022, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Developing a Grounded Theory of Personal and Professional Motivations of School Counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Kathryn Babb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00004736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Documents Reviewed: | • FA Form, Category: Faculty Research Approval;  
|                 | • Demographic Questionnaire.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire;  
|                 | • Study 4736 HRP-255-FORM KB Edits2.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;  
|                 | • Study 4736 Informed Consent_KB Edits3.pdf, Category: Consent Form;  
|                 | • Study 4736 Interview Questions_KB Edits2.docx, Category: Interview / Focus Questions;  
|                 | • Study 4736 Recruitment Email_KB Edits2.docx, Category: Recruitment Materials; |

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.
If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Tamiko Fukuda
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT
EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: Developing a grounded theory of personal and professional motivations of school counselors

Principal Investigator: Kate Babb, MA

Faculty Supervisor: Viki Kelchner, PhD

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

The purpose of the study is to explore the motivations of school counselors for entering and remaining in the profession. It will also explore the supports and barriers experienced by professional school counselors and how that has impacted retention.

You will participate in a telephone interview to discuss your motivations for becoming a school counselor and your experiences in the profession along with an online demographic questionnaire. You will also be contacted after the interview to review the interview transcription for accuracy. A private setting will be required for the interview. The research team will also be in a private area.

It is anticipated that your time commitment for the interview will be approximately 60 minutes. The demographic questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes. The member checking process will take approximately 10 minutes. Your total participation time in this study is approximately 75 minutes.

You will be audio-recorded during this study. Your audio recording will be transcribed by Otter.AI, an automated transcription service powered by artificial intelligence. Please note that the recording will be used by Otter.AI based on their privacy policy. If you do not want to be recorded, you will not be able to be in the study. Discuss this with the researcher or a research team member. To protect your confidentiality, you will be referenced only as your assigned participant number in the data collection process and study write-up.

To protect your confidentiality, you will be given a participant number which will be used throughout the interview, in the transcription, and in the study write-up. Transcriptions will be de-identified and a linking sheet will be used by the research team to link you to your participant number. Upon completion of the study, your recording will be kept on a computer owned by the primary researcher that is double password protected. Only the research team will have access to data. Identifiable data (audio recordings, linking sheet, and contact information) will be stored separately from deidentified data (demographic questionnaire and transcripts) on the UCF OneDrive system. All data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years.
after study closure per Florida law.

You will be compensated with a $20 Amazon gift card via email within one week following your interview. If you withdraw from the study prior to completing the interview in its entirety, you will not receive any compensation. If you complete the interview in its entirety but do not complete the member checking process, you will still receive full compensation.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice or penalty. Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will in no way affect your relationship with UCF, including continued enrollment, grades, employment or your relationship with the individuals who may have an interest in this study.

To be eligible for the study, you must (a) hold an active Florida school counseling professional certificate; (b) have completed at least three school years and no more than five school years in the profession; (c) have a professional contract for the 2022-2023 school year; and (d) work in the state of Florida, (e) must be 21 years of age.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, contact Kate Babb, Principal Investigator, Doctoral Candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision Program, College of Community Innovation and Education, (208) 699-2892 or via email at kate.babb@knights.ucf.edu, or Dr. Viki Kelchner, Faculty Supervisor, College of Community Innovation and Education at (803) 730-4351 or by email at viki.kelchner@ucf.edu.

**IRB contact about your rights in this study or to report a complaint:** If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or have concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of Central Florida, Office of Research, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901, or email irb@ucf.edu.
Oct 31, 17 interviews

- Be cognizant of:
  1. Strengths-based team meeting
  2. Cloud computing
  3. Iterative process, follow-up interviews, momma checks
  4. Intersectionality of PSC and researcher ties influence how participants respond
  5. Discussion about role, confidentiality, or research purpose prior to beginning interviews

- Counseling training emerging in interviews
  - Use protocol, but allow conversation to be organic
goal is to understand
tap into counseling techniques

October 31, 17 interviews

- Participant (make sense; clear
  shapes knowledge)
- Writing and story
- Family dynamics, roles, examples, impact
- Personal experience, mentorship, 
PSC background, state legislation
- How
time
- Perception of colleague
- "As you know..."
- "What counseling role
- "I should say..."
- PSC, admin or district
- Potential applicants?

- Experience as PSC reading
- Influence of 17 interviews, reflecting
- Discussions of feedback, initial coding, counseling theory

- Voice: strength-based perspectives, clearer, 
  communication, not a school counselor
  need for strength-based cloud roles?
  PSC background is unworkable

Theory influences my coding!
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Email subject line: Invitation for Study Participation

My name is Kate Babb and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Central Florida in the Counselor Education and Clinical Supervision program. Under the supervision of Dr. Viki Kelchner, I am conducting a study called “Developing a Grounded Theory of Personal and Professional Motivations of School Counselors.” The purpose of the study is to explore the motivations of school counselors for entering and remaining in the profession. It will also explore the supports and barriers experienced by professional school counselors and how that has impacted retention. The information obtained will be useful for school counseling programs, professional school counselors, and school districts. For this study, you are invited to participate in an individual interview via telephone for approximately one hour and a 5-minute demographic survey. Following your interview, you will also be asked to review a short document describing the discussion of the interview to check for accuracy, called member checking.

About the study:

● One 5-minute demographic survey, one 60-minute voluntary phone interview.
● Your identity will remain confidential.
● You can withdraw at any time.
● All participants will be compensated with a $20 Amazon gift card.
● This study has been reviewed by the University of Central Florida IRB.

Participants must meet these requirements:

● Hold an active Florida school counseling professional certificate.
● Has completed at least 3 years and no more than 5 years in the profession.
● Has a professional contract for the 2022-2023 school year.
● Work in the state of Florida.
● Be at least 21 years of age.

I appreciate your willingness to consider contributing to the continued research in the area of counselor preparation. If you are willing to participate, please respond back to me to begin the scheduling process.

Thank you,

Kate Babb, MS, NCC
Principal Investigator & Doctoral Candidate
kate.babb@knights.ucf.edu
Study Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Viki Kelcher can be reached at viki.kelchner@ucf.edu
APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: ________
Age: __________
Gender identity: ___________________
What would best describe the size of your current school district?
   LARGE       MEDIUM       SMALL
How many students attend the school you currently work at? ________________
Approximate number of students on your caseload: __________
How does your department divide into caseloads?
   ALPHA       GRADE       OTHER (please specify)
What grade level(s) do you serve: __________
Number of years in the profession: ____
How many schools have you worked at thus far? ____
Have you had a profession other than school counseling? If so, what was it?
   ________________________________
Do you currently hold any additional counseling-related certifications? If so, what are they?
   ________
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(a) “When did you first think about studying school counseling?”
(b) “Can you describe the events that led to you applying for your master’s program?”
(c) “If you recall, what assumptions did you have about the role of a school counselor?”
(d) “Can you share where those assumptions may have come from?”
(e) “What elements, if any, of your personal life influenced your decision to be a school counselor?”
   (e1) “Do you find those elements still relevant now? Why or why not?”
(f) “What elements, if any, of your professional development influenced your decision to be a school counselor?”
   (f1) “Do you find those elements still relevant now? Why or why not?”
(g) “Have you ever considered leaving the field of school counseling? If so, why did you decide to stay?”
(h) “Think about the support you have received throughout these first few years of your career. How have they influenced your decision to remain in the profession?”
(i) “Would you encourage other counselors-in-training to pursue the career of school counseling? Why or why not?”
APPENDIX G: EXAMPLE OF FREE WRITE MEMOING
This was my most enjoyable interview. So far, she was happy, energetic, and optimistic about her life and job. She has amazing energy and an exceptionally warm demeanor. It was interesting that she knew she wanted to be a clerk in early secondary school. She had worked in the youth system before. To be what really confirmed that she was interested in the role that her family dynamic plays in her life. She spoke so warmly about the relationships she has with her parents, but didn’t say much about her brother. It seemed like the experiences she had at the daycare were what led her to consider for others. But is it really her brother? The experience she had with her PCP is very touching, especially as the relationship continued into adulthood. Does she do that with her students? Keep in touch as they transition to middle school? She also has an interesting perspective on the relationship with her colleagues. She turned to them as family multiple times in the conversation, which is similar to her explanation of her friend group. Clearly, relationships are incredibly important to her, and “I feel like I’m at school.” That is something to further explore. How do other participants feel at school?

Questions/Thoughts:
- Family dynamics seem to be very important in this context of belonging to her school and students.
- She was incredibly enthusiastic about her job, yet has considered leaving yet.

unreadable
APPENDIX H: EXAMPLE OF CLUSTERING AND ACCOMPANYING FOCUSED FREEWRITE MEMOING
Potential Category: Desire to Work K-12

Focused Focus: Desire to Work K-12

I'm trying to move away from general thematic coding, and that feels like where this cluster still remains. I feel comfortable that K-12 setting is a stand-alone category, but the other bubbles aren't quite right. Desire to be a teacher doesn't capture enough. Not many participants were teachers. Influential person was pretty much discounted. Work with children seems okay, but I need to be more specific. What K-12 experience actually entails?

- Does liking learning mean they want to be in an academic environment?
- Is the K-12 experience or PSC in particular? (Assumptions viewing)

Check initial ideas re: classroom teaching
Kate Babb 05:28
Okay. So one thing that you said that is interesting to me. You knew you wanted to work with kids, what kind of deterred you from working in the jail system was that you thought you wouldn't be with the kids too much. How did you know you wanted to work with kids?

05:52
So during high school, there was a daycare across the street from my high school. And I did a lot of my community service hours there. And I worked so closely with like, little infants and like the pre pre K age, elementary school age, it was mostly like the baby babies like pre K for kindergarten that I worked with. But I just loved them so much. And I don't know, I just knew that. Whatever I did, I wanted to be around kids. So I don't know. I've just always loved kids.

Kate Babb 06:30
Just out of curiosity. Do you have siblings?

06:32
I have an older brother.

Kate Babb 06:37
Just the two of you.

06:38
Yep. Just the two of us and all and I don't really have a lot of family that lives here in in Florida, either. So I guess maybe I just always longed for that, like those relationships with our little kids. So yeah.

Kate Babb 06:55
Awesome. Okay. So if you recall, and this might tie into your experience, thinking about school psych, and then learning about school counseling. What assumptions did you have about the role of the school counselor? And where do you think those came from?

07:15
I think that they came from just my own experiences in school, having a school counselor and like, I always thought that they were the teachers who go around and then they like, play videos for the kids to watch especially like, during Red Ribbon Week, you know about drug prevention, and they're the ones that you get to talk to if you're ever dealing with anything, you go to them about your classes, like I just all whatever I knew, I knew because I just assumed that's what they did. From, you know, from the counselor that I had at school, you know?

Kate Babb 07:51
Do you have do you recall having a What kind of relationship you had with your the counselors, you worked with anything that would be remarkable about that relationship?

08:00
Um, I don't remember having a relationship with my middle school one like at all. But I remember my my high school counselor, she was tight with her because we did like through last names. And I love that so much because I had her from freshman year all the way to senior year and I didn't have to lie like keep relearning someone. And she helped me so much anytime I needed any help with like, a class change or like, why do you want this class change? She just like always had my back I felt and I don't know, she was just so sweet. And even afterwards when I graduated, and I had to ask like questions and do like certain projects or whatever. She was so helpful. And still to this day, if I ever reached out to her, she's there. So she's amazing.

Kate Babb 08:58
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