Special Issue: Emerging Scholars 2025

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELING

EMERGING SCHOLARS PROGRAM

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Professional School Counseling **Emerging Scholars Special Issue Introduction**

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Abstract

In this special issue, the contributing author(s), the PSC Emerging Scholars inaugural cohort, provide an array of research and scholarship within the context of school counseling. These innovative Scholars and their bodies of work utilized various methodologies when conducting research and creative conceptualizations largely grounded in social justice and systemic change: reimagining how the school counseling profession could be strengthened across research, teaching and practice. This scholarship reminds counselor educators, practitioners, and professional organizations alike to not settle for the status quo, nor maintain complacency. In addition, the authors infuse fresh research and practice ideas and draw upon ongoing needs for clarity, through their research on school counselors and their roles within K-12 public schools. This collective of work, framed around the *Professional School Counseling* Emerging Scholars Program, is compelling yet leaves additional questions to be answered and opportunities to develop these burgeoning lines of inquiry more fully. In sum, while there continues to be a pipeline desire and need to foster the academic opportunities for school counselor doctoral students and early career school counselor education faculty, particularly those from historically marginalized identities, this special issue takes one salient step toward this goal.

Introduction to the Special Issue

There remains an ongoing challenge to interrogate and dismantle educational systems that far too often lack the representation needed to justly educate students across all spectrums of identity. These inequities are rampant in K-12 education, as noted by the Office of Civil Rights and others. For instance, queer students, students with disabilities, English learners, and other minoritized youth continue to deal with ongoing inequities related to access and educational opportunity (e.g., Kosciw, et al., 2015; Skiba, et al., 2011; U.S. DoE, 2025). Yet, the racial and ethnic demographics of K-12 students are unmatched with the school staff and this imbalance is seen across higher education as well (Ashkenas, Haeyoun, & Pearce, 2017; Wells, 2020). However, we do know that students from marginalized populations benefit when there is educator representation within school counseling (SC) and school counselor educators (SCE) (Betters-Bubon, et al., 2021; Lee & Lemberger-TrueLove, 2024). While researchers and scholars call for CE programs to (a) enhance practices and policies to ensure they create opportunities for future school counselor educators holding marginalized identities and (b) engage in active recruitment and retention strategies to increase the pipeline of racially/ethnically diverse individuals within the academy, these efforts have been sporadic over the years (Hannon, et al., 2019, Vasquez Heilig et al., 2019). The impetus for growing SCEs in particular includes but is not limited to broadening the representation of marginalized identities within the higher education pipeline which in turn could lead to greater numbers of future SCs holding marginalized

identities in K-12 schools (Lopez-Perry, et al., 2021). Simply put, there is a need for more representation of diverse SCs in K-12, and to support diverse identities in higher education through culturally affirming, strength-based, and anti-racist retention efforts (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022).

The link from SC to SCE is clear in that one needs a doctoral degree in order to be eligible to work at a college/university as a counselor educator. Therefore, in order to create greater diversity for future SCEs the field needs more SCE faculty, more SC doctoral students, and more masters' students from these backgrounds enrolling. Thus, in order to address the persistent opportunities, partnerships between SCE leaders, CE programs, and national organizations can use creative strategies and resources to meet the demand.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is an exemplar in this regard. With the vision and human resources, SCE Leaders Drs. Emily Goodman-Scott and Kaprea Johnson as Emerging Scholars Associate Editors for the *PSC* journal, in concert with ASCA, created and began facilitating the PSC Emerging Scholars program. Following the first year of implementation, Dr. Sam Steen joined as an Associate Editor for the Emerging Scholars program leadership to help with a spontaneous transition that occurred for Dr. Johnson (who accepted a major leadership role within her home institution).

Through the PSC Emerging Scholars program, we engaged in the national recruitment and the selection of a cohort of approximately 10 early career school counselor education scholars, thereby creating the inaugural cohort of PSC Scholars. Through close collaboration with the Scholars, we worked toward the following goals: (a) increase PSC Emerging Scholars' research exposure and experiences; (b) develop a community within the cohort; and (c) discuss the culture of academia. To apply, each applicant was required to have experiences as a practicing school counselor and to identify with identities historically marginalized in academia. Further, prospective Scholars specialized in school counseling, either as a doctoral student or early career counselor educator. Thus, we strove to improve research opportunities and quality of SC research in the field, and assist in diversifying the researcher and academic pipeline in school counseling.

As we experienced the PSC Scholars program in practice over the last three years, according to observations, feedback, and program evaluation data, we believe this program is chipping away at meeting our program goals. We perceive that the program has helped participants advance their scholarship, better understand the culture of academia, and build community with others in a similar place in their career. Those from populations historically minoritized are represented within the current PSC scholars program and for the most part, the Scholars' articles published in this special issue are one of their first peer-reviewed publications.

What is important to note is that in addition to spending the final year of the program gaining a deeper understanding of the research process (from idea conceptualization to publication), they have also learned to be more critical scholars. They have learned about writing and publishing from reviewing other research/scholarship, critiquing papers and examining how other PSC Editorial board members review manuscripts. This has been especially important as many of the PSC Scholars remain or have been full-time school counselors over the course of this program. And rooted in community, the special issue is a culmination of an ongoing effort to build on the professional networks within and beyond the PSC Scholar participants to include SC leaders in the field.

The PSC Emerging Scholars Special issue is a snapshot of the gifts and talents this group, individually and collectively, offer the field of SC at this juncture of their careers, with the promise for more to come in the future. None of the PSC Scholars were forced to remain within the field of SC, but the two-way street of investments is already reaping dividends illustrated in part by the findings in the final article within this special issue corpus of articles. See Goodman-Scott et al., for more specific insight.

The *PSC* Emerging Scholars requested clarity on what was next for them as their second year of the program was coming to a close. As a result of this inquiry, it was decided that spending an additional year contributing to the SC literature by publishing an article of their choice, with the only requirement being an unapologetic focus on school counseling, would be a mutually beneficial endeavor. This is important as we know within the school counseling literature that school counselors who transition from practice to counselor education face many benefits and challenges; one of the largest challenges is comfort and skills pertaining to scholarship (Milsom & Moran, 2015). Therefore, this past year, through intentional dialogue and mentoring at every stage of the writing process, these Scholars learned that *Professional School Counseling* is a peer-reviewed journal of ASCA and publishes quality manuscripts on theory, research and best practices for the profession. The Scholars discussed that across their personal and professional experiences there was an opportunity for them to highlight how to use advocacy, leadership and collaboration to bring about systemic change through school counseling research and practice.

In this special issue, the reader will find articles developed by the *PSC* Emerging Scholars, demonstrating the power of research and practice related to school counseling, that fosters academic, social/emotional, and career development within a K-12 context. Due to the growing need for more research related to K-12 schools, social justice and systemic chance, mental health and wellness, leadership, diversity, equity and inclusion, and so forth, these articles offer innovative and timely research and practice experiences of the PSC Scholars and when appropriate, their teams, which broaden the scholarly compilation reflecting the growing need for diverse perspectives and scholarly methods. This special issue is a platform that cultivates

the opportunity for the PSC Scholars to add to the body of school counseling research, practice ideas, and contribute to emerging areas for professional development.

The articles included in this special issue explore research and practice, with an emphasis on innovative ideas concerning schools, through the lens of school counseling including but not limited to culture, students and families, teachers and staff, training and preparation, policy and practice. The purpose of this special issue is to synthesize contributions of the PSC Scholars representing a range of issues that first and foremost were important to the scholars. By proxy, these topics are important for school counselors and the school counseling profession. The scholars contributed articles pertaining to them, their communities, identities, research agendas, professional goals and objectives, hopes and dreams. As a result of these efforts, the reader will see how these scholars champion equity, access, inclusive excellence and social justice within school counseling contexts. Following we provide a brief note about the authors' (listed alphabetically) articles that are published in this compilation.

First, Cha, in a solo authored pilot study, seeks to understand more fully how counselors and advisers sharing cultural backgrounds and lived experiences engage in meaningful diálogo (dialogue) with the students they serve in order to affirm their identities while providing culturally affirming and relevant college knowledge. In this creative phenomenological study that won an AERA Outstanding dissertation award (2024), using the Social Capital Theory Institution Agents framework, she discovers that neglected structural challenges such as exceptionally large caseloads, investments in professional development and so forth continue, despite school counseling researchers and practitioners calling for change. The attention given to the college counselors, their environments and their students from overlapping backgrounds is intriguing and offers a strong foundation to be built upon in future research.

Second, Fensom as a sole author, provides a practitioner-focused study. In this article, she presents the outcomes of a culturally affirming classroom program she co-facilitated for high school students from minoritized backgrounds where she was a school counselor for a significant portion of her career. This study fills several important gaps in the literature due to the fact that it is program/intervention research, centers Black student populations in particular, and is conducted by a school counselor within an urban high school. These topics are often highlighted as missing in counselor education content analyses (Falco, et al., 2025). In addition to her study filling critical gaps, it can also be used as a model as long as the local context is considered as she notes within her article.

Third, Holmes as a sole author, through using a case illustration, creatively analyzes the need for more clinical school counselor supervision within the present K-12 structures, offering Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a creative solution. This thoughtful presentation of synthesized scholarship offers innovation to ensure school counselors receive both support and

professional development in the field in the context of school counselors' time constraints, leading to the best care for the communities they will serve. In addition to this creativity, this thoughtful article shines a light on how this work could also eliminate burnout that continues to plague the field.

Fourth, Kirk and colleagues also target an ongoing dilemma. In their non-experimental quantitative study, they use linear regression to examine if elementary school counselor and principal relationships predict elementary school counselors' implementation of the ASCA National Model. This study reiterates the importance of collaboration across myriad dimensions, but stresses the connection with school principals as well as the guiding documents (e.g., mission and vision). Interestingly enough, this research is timely as the new ASCA National Model is coming forth and requiring the need for more studies.

Fifth, Perez, Boyce-Rosen, and Bircher offer a qualitative narrative inquiry to engage five school counselor champions, illustrating how they intentionally infuse forms of cultural community wealth [(CCW); Yosso, 2005] within their comprehensive school counseling efforts, countering the deficit narratives unfortunately common in practice and research. This article is a powerful illustration of community strength, qualitative strategies, and program implementation. The authors' research design is strong and is a model for others conducting critical qualitative studies centering SC practice. Furthermore, the collaborative approach to research that is highlighted by the team, which includes PSC Scholars and partners outside of this program is duly noted reinforcing the power of community.

Sixth, Pharoah as a sole author pleads, through a critical and reflective discourse, for our professional communities to acknowledge the atrocities within broader society that bleed into the fabric of our educational systems across k-12 and higher education, impacting Black male school counselors in particular. In this article, Pharoah draws upon the notion of "spirit murder" a term Legal scholar Patricia Williams uses to make plain and simple that racism is more than just physical pain; racism prevents humanity and dignity and leaves personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries for Black and other minoritized people. While jarring at times, this article jolts action that advances equity or reinforces one's status quo grip; yet he graciously extends an olive branch providing recommendations and a willingness to participate in fostering solutions.

Articles seventh and eighth, both autoethnographies and solely authored, espouse compelling personal narratives of the scholars' experiences navigating destructive and damaging school counselor education and school counseling environments respectively. Rosario-Singer unabashedly reveals critical junctures throughout her professional identity journey. She details existing in hostile working environments, which requires balancing motherhood and social justice advocacy, as well as making difficult choices and welcoming sacrifices as strengths. This path expands the meaning of being Latine within the field, while also teaching us about

Mujerista psychology and illustrating motherscholar epistemology. The reader is invited to feel these "moral dilemmas" and make choices within their own scholarship. Equally impressive Tillery, uses a lens of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to center Black girls and offer a reimagination of cultural responsiveness, relationship-centered practices, and actions that cultivate thriving educational environments across the identity spectrum, while demonstrating joy and hope for these brilliant Black girls. Tillery's experience in public schools shines through, demonstrating the power of representation as well. It is important to note that these two articles are the only two autoethnographies published within PSC to date, highlighting a research method that aligns with the school counseling profession's desire to center practitioners' voices in research. Both Rosair-Singer and Tillery offer exemplars of the autoethnography approach for school counseling scholars, demonstrating a rigorous research method found in other education and social science disciplines.

Ninth, Wood et al., conducted a quantitative study that surveyed nearly 500 school counselors working in the field. Her research article explores the extent to which one's training and personal experience with grief and loss impacts their competence to cope with death within school counseling practice. This integrated research with practice outcomes is compelling, highlighting the dearth in our training professional organization standards. Wood recognizes there are programs specializing in grief training (e.g., ASCA), yet there remains great room for improvement. This article is a seminal study within a budding line of research serving as a true representation of more great scholarship to come.

Finally, the special issue concludes with an action research study that spells out the PSC Emerging Scholars program and program evaluation. In this article, the facilitators of the PSC Emerging Scholars Program, Goodman-Scott, Johnson, and Steen unpack the process of program development and implementation through a four-step action research approach, reflecting on strengths and areas of enhancement in the coming iterations. Of particular importance, the voices of the Scholars are centered, robustly depicting their anecdotes and experiences throughout the multi-year PSC Emerging Scholars cohort. These experiences not only guided Cohort 1, but also laid a solid foundation for the development of future cohorts.

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High School College Counselors enter into Diálogo (Dialogue) with Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Latine Students: A Pilot Study

By Maritza A. Cha, Alhambra Unified School District

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how high school college counselors and advisers engage in diálogo (dialogue) and build relationships with socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students around college knowledge and postsecondary planning. Drawing on pláticas (conversation) with three bilingual, Latina/o-identifying counselors and advisers at California public high schools, the study examines how shared cultural heritage, lived experiences as first-generation college-goers, and long-standing ties to school communities shape relational advising practices. Findings reveal that counselors leveraged cultural responsiveness, mentorship, and intentional programming to establish trust and demystify college-going processes. However, participants also identified systemic challenges—including high student-to-counselor ratios, limited access to professional development, and inequitable resource distribution—that constrained their capacity to provide individualized support. The literature review highlights persistent disparities in college access for low-income and minoritized students. The study concludes with recommendations for practice and policy, including increased hiring of dedicated college counselors, investment in culturally sustaining professional development, and further research into student perceptions of counseling support. This research contributes to a growing body of work on high school college counseling.

Introduction

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defines school counselors as certified educators whose role is to help students succeed academically, manage their social-emotional health, and plan for postsecondary options (ASCA, 2019b). McDonough (2005a) noted that the American Counseling Association (ACA) and ASCA do not mention college advising in general in their mission statements, but they do specifically mention college entrance exams. This article focuses on how college counselors act as social capital institutional agents in transmitting college information and explores the impact of shared or common cultural and linguistic experiences and backgrounds, institutional experience and resources (or lack thereof) on college counselors' ability to build successful relationships and support for their students.

Literature Review

Prior studies indicate that support for students' postsecondary paths depends on access to high-quality college counseling; however, these services are not provided equitably (Perna et al., 2008). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019) recommends a 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio. In practice, however, the ratios are usually far higher. Among the highest in the country, California's public high schools for instance have an average ratio of 644:1 (ASCA, 2019a). McDonough (2005a) points out that this ratio includes full- and part-time counselors,

and many school counselors are expected to handle duties beyond the ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs' description of appropriate counselor duties. (ASCA, 2019)

Due to their higher student-to-counselor ratios, a public high school that does not have a dedicated college counselor to address postsecondary planning must rely on high school counselors to take on that responsibility while also trying to manage the other domains of high school counseling (Simmons, 2011). The imbalance between counselor capacity and student is greater in schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged students, as revealed by the research of Gagnon and Mattingly (2016). Students in these environments might get less individualized attention and inconsistent post-secondary preparation support.

Impact of Counselor Ratios on Postsecondary Planning

The challenges of elevated caseloads are exacerbated by the expectations placed on counselors regarding time allocation. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and ASCA issued a report, NACAC (2019), which tracked counselor caseloads and revealed that high school counselors allocate 21% of their time to postsecondary admission counseling, 25% to personal needs counseling, and 23% to course selection and scheduling. However, counselors at non parochial private schools spent 54% of their time on postsecondary planning (NACAC, 2019). Vela Gude et al. (2009), documented the administrative burdens placed on counselors, in addition to their large caseloads. This leads counselors to rely on group presentations rather than more effective individualized interactions.

Woods and Domina's (2014) quantitative study, using the Education Longitudinal Study Database of 2002, found that students attending schools with smaller counselor caseloads were more likely to speak with a counselor about college, to plan to attend a four-year institution, to take the SAT, and ultimately to enroll. Their findings affirm that accessing counselors significantly predicts students' successful navigation through the high school-to-college pipeline. Scholars recently conducted a meta-analytic review of 16 studies and concluded that higher ratios were consistently associated with worse student outcomes. Their analysis showed that reducing counselor caseloads yielded the strongest positive effects on high school graduation rates, discipline reduction, and attendance outcomes, which have significant implications for postsecondary success (Kearney et al., 2021).

Effects on Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students

The consequences of limited access to counseling are especially significant for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ecton, 2019). These students are less inclined to obtain individualized college assistance and are more likely to make post-secondary decisions based on misinformation or assumptions. For example, Hoxby (2004), found that students from low-income households often overestimate the net cost of attending college, which may potentially deter them from even applying. Furthermore, Hoxby and Turner (2013), found that

students lack information needed to identify their best fits from among the possible colleges and universities. Horn et al. (2003), and Hoxby and Avery (2012), also found that socioeconomically disadvantaged students often possess insufficient knowledge about institutional differences regarding the availability of financial aid. These informational barriers prevent students from understanding the full range of postsecondary opportunities available to them, or from identifying the postsecondary options that may best fit their particular situations.

Belasco (2013), utilizing data from the NCES Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, found that students who engaged with counselors about college were significantly more likely to enroll in four-year postsecondary institutions. Woods and Domina (2014), reinforce this finding, showing that students in schools with smaller counselor caseloads had greater college enrollment rates, even after controlling for academic and demographic variables. Yet, in public urban schools, the student-to-counselor ratio is much higher in schools with majority socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color, which implies that counselors are fewer in number and often unavailable for college advising (McDonough, 2005a).

The Role and Influence of School Counselors

Multiple studies have documented school counselors' positive influence on college enrollment, especially among marginalized populations. In schools with lower caseloads, counselors are more likely to act as gate-openers, helping students develop college plans, access financial aid, and complete applications. In contrast, overburdened counselors focus their limited time on students already perceived as "college material," and leaving others without guidance (Corwin et al., 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Bryan et al. (2009), and McDonough (2005b), agree that a high school counselor is often the most important adult in the school building for providing college resources to students. Bryan et al. (2011), emphasize that early contact between students and counselors is essential and that parent involvement enhances the effectiveness of college counseling efforts. Despite these findings, college counseling has not been a focus in school counselor training programs (Bryan et al., 2011). This disconnect can result in missed opportunities to support first-generation, low-income, and minoritized students effectively.

Counselor beliefs and expectations also play a critical role. Vela Gude et al. (2009), found that some students perceived their counselors as holding low expectations for their postsecondary success, which in turn discouraged the students from pursuing more selective college options. Bryan et al. (2009; 2011), and Rutter et al. (2020), suggest that school counselors must actively work against such biases by promoting equitable access to college knowledge across racial, socioeconomic, and ability lines. Rutter et al.'s (2020), qualitative study that engaged 10 school counselors also emphasized the importance of early intervention, culturally responsive advising, and parental involvement, especially for Latine students, where fear of leaving home and financial concerns were cited as major barriers to college access.

Summary and Research Gap

The existing literature demonstrates a strong consensus regarding the importance of school counselors in supporting college access, especially for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. High student-to-counselor ratios, limited time for postsecondary advising, and insufficient professional development all hinder counselors' ability to provide support. These challenges are worse in under-resourced urban schools that predominantly serve socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalized student populations.

However, gaps remain in the literature. First, while studies have explored counselor influence broadly, fewer have examined the unique role of dedicated high school college counselors. This leaves a gap in understanding the conditions, practices, and professional development needs of individuals directly engaged specifically in college counseling. Second, limited research has explored how counselors with shared cultural and linguistic identities with students may enhance trust, engagement, and outcomes, especially among Latine communities. Lastly, though beyond the scope of this study, more qualitative research is needed to explore how students themselves experience the college counseling process, including how they may access information related to college knowledge.

This study explores how high school college counselors and advisers cultivate relationships with socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students and provide college knowledge to the students.

Conceptual Framework

This is a phenomenological research study. This research uses the Social Capital Theory-Institutional Agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) framework to explore how college counselors, as institutional agents, engage and build on the assets of Latine students. Stanton-Salazar's (2011) theoretical framework is built on Coleman's (1988) and Bourdieu's (1986) work on Social Capital Theory (Farr, 2004). Stanton-Salazar's (2011) theoretical framework uses the term "institutional agents," on which he has further built since 1997 (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined an institutional agent as an individual in a position of relatively higher status and authority who, on behalf of an adolescent, transmits resources to the adolescent. The Social Capital Theory-Institutional Agents framework (Stanton Salazar, 2011) was used to analyze college counselor participants' responses.

The study employed pláticas as an interview approach because it is rooted in Latine epistemologies (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Pláticas, are informal yet intentional conversations, which serve as a culturally grounded method of knowledge exchange and meaning-making (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Pláticas are a "way to gather family and cultural knowledge through communication of thoughts, memories, ambiguities, and new interpretations" (González, 1998). Pláticas are a "reciprocal process" and participants have to be

"open and vulnerable" (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Pláticas are "co-constructed" spaces where participants and researchers engage as mutual contributors to knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Espino et al., 2010).

The plática interview methodology, as explained by Valle and Mendoza (1978), has three phases. Phase one is "la entrada," or the entrance, where a discussion is had with the interviewee about the mutual contact that connected them. Phase two is "amistad interview," or friendship interview, in which the conversation is both a "proper" interview and an informal "conversation byplay" that takes place before "getting down to business," according to Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016). Phase three is "la despedida," or the goodbye, which shows the participants appreciation for being in conversation and telling their story or narrative.

Taking into consideration my participants' culture and community, I employed pláticas as a way to have the participants "co-construct knowledge" (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), as I was tapping into their memories and interpretations of experiences from their journey (Gonzalez, 1998). Having this counter-storytelling, or diálogo, embedded in research creates more knowledge that has a cultural footprint. Diálogo allows for the development of a safe space that nurtures the relationship between the interviewer and the person disclosing their story (Mesa Vélez, 2019). This helps create a "reciprocal process" and allows the participant be "open and vulnerable" (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

Given the limited prior research focusing on high school college counselors, and especially the impact of shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the purpose of the current study is to explore how shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds, along with institutional experiences, resources and constraints, influence high school college counselors' capacity to build effective relationships and transmit college knowledge to students. Therefore, the following questions guided this research:

What are the ways in which college counselors enter into diálogo (dialogue) and engage in relationships with socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students around college knowledge?

Subquestion 1: How do college counselors establish relationships with socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students around college knowledge?

Subquestion 2: How do college counselors support socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students around college knowledge?

Method

My research is focused on the high school college counseling role, which in practice tends to focus on postsecondary options. I interviewed three high school college counselors or advisers from each site. In California, where the research took place, a person can serve in the role as a credentialed counselor or as an out-of-classroom teacher without a counseling-specific credential. An out-of-classroom teacher serving in the role is referred to as a college advisor, whereas a credentialed counselor in the role is referred to as a college counselor. I will be using the term "college counselor" to include both positions.

This qualitative study was conducted at three public high schools located within the same large urban school district in California. Each of the schools maintains an on-site college and career center that operates independently from the main counseling office. These sites were purposefully selected due to their demographic similarities and geographic proximity, ensuring a level of contextual consistency across research locations. Each college and career center is run by a single college counselor.

Positionality

This topic holds deep personal significance for me as a first-generation Latina student who, for most of my educational journey, was considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. I attended a high school where one college counselor was responsible for nearly 5,000 students. So, though I had a high school counselor, their caseload was overwhelming. Our only interaction came once a year during course registration, typically lasting no more than three minutes. As a first-generation student, my family depended on the school for guidance throughout the college application process. By chance, I met the college counselor and was fortunate to build a relationship, which caused or enabled her to support me through my journey to college. During my senior year of high school, I was able to have a class period at the College Center, as a peer counselor, where I was able to get personalized support from her. My family and I are grateful that she was able to guide me and provide me with the college knowledge needed to apply to colleges. I am aware, however, that many of my peers were not as lucky and did not have the same access to that kind of support. Now, as a former teacher and high school counselor, I work closely with students who face many of the same barriers I did. My personal experience drives my commitment to ensure that students with backgrounds like mine receive effective college guidance.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place between late Spring 2022 and Fall 2023. After obtaining university and district IRB approval, I contacted the college counselors via email and provided a synopsis of the study. Once the college counselors agreed, I provided consent forms. When consent forms were returned, I sent a demographic survey and times for the interview. The interviews were each conducted via Zoom due to pandemic-related restrictions to minimize physical contact.

Two interviews occurred in the spring semester, while the third was completed in the fall of the following academic year. Each plática lasted approximately 45 minutes, or roughly equivalent to a standard class period. All interviews were audio-recorded on Zoom, and participants completed a demographic survey and consent forms via Google Forms before the interview. After the interviews were transcribed, the interviews were sent to the participant for member checking.

Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using manual, or hand, coding techniques. I employed elemental coding methods as described by Saldaña (2021), specifically utilizing both descriptive coding and in vivo coding. To situate the interviews within their broader educational contexts, I compiled background information on each school site. This contextual information was drawn from three sources: school profiles provided by the participating counselors, publicly available content from each school's official website, and the district's open data platform (a publicly accessible website that provides a wide array of data such as graduation rates, state assessment scores, and college and career readiness).

Interview transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to the coding process. During the initial round of coding, I applied descriptive codes to counselor/advisor interviews, guided by the study's research questions and informed by Social Capital Theory-Institutional Agents framework (Stanton Salazar, 2011). In particular, I examined what forms of knowledge counselors and advisors conveyed to students and the methods they used to share that knowledge. A second reading of the transcripts focused on in-vivo coding. Additionally, I wrote analytic memos at the conclusion of each interview that served as spaces for both methodological and theoretical reflection and also contributed some initial descriptive codes. Following this iterative coding process, I conducted selective coding to identify and group recurring patterns and thematic elements across the dataset. This step helped identify and develop overarching themes that responded to the study's guiding research questions.

This methodological approach aimed to honor culturally relevant ways of knowing while providing insight into how Latine students and their college advisors navigate the complex process of college preparation and access.

Findings

This study examined how college counselors engage in diálogo (dialogue) and build relationships with socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students around college knowledge. Specifically, it explored how these practitioners enter into relational practices that are rooted in trust and shared experiences. The contextual information drawn from the school profiles, school websites, and the district's open data platform showed that the population of students attending each of the three high school sites was over 90% Latine. When the counselors

completed the demographic form, all three expressed identities that fall under Latine. Once the interviews were completed, participants—two college advisers and one college counselor—spoke about leveraging their bilingualism, cultural backgrounds, and prior teaching experience to foster meaningful relationships with students.

Shared Cultural Background as a Foundation for Relationship-Building

All three participants self-identified as Latina/o, were bilingual, and were first-generation college students themselves. These commonalities served as powerful entry points for diálogo with students navigating the college process with similar backgrounds.

One adviser reflected on her own parents' high regard for education despite their limited capacity to offer concrete guidance. "My parents knew education was important, but they didn't know how to support us in getting there," she shared, noting that many of her students voiced similar frustrations. Another adviser described growing up with undocumented parents who worked long hours as a farmworker, factory worker, and seamstress. As a result, he seldom saw them and had limited access to college-related guidance. He stated:

> "Although I didn't know anything about college—right—because I was first-generation, other than knowing USC was my favorite school just because of the football team…I kind of connected with other students that were college-bound and latched on to them…Looking back, I could see I could have gone in different directions depending on where a counselor thought I should be placed."

This reflection illustrated how chance encounters, rather than intentional support, had shaped his college trajectory—an experience he now works to prevent for his students by engaging in proactive, relationship-centered advising.

Similarly, the college counselor recalled growing up as the daughter of Mexican immigrants who relied on their children to serve as translators and contribute financially. These responsibilities mirrored the lived realities of many of her students. She shared how this connection enabled her to hold culturally sensitive conversations about college decisions—such as attending school far from home—based on her own experience navigating family expectations. Her ability to empathize with and guide students through these conversations allowed her to maintain open, honest and sustained dialogue rooted in shared understanding.

Participants established relationships with students by drawing on shared or similar cultural and familial experiences to foster trust and understanding. The participants' backgrounds and experiences in common with their students provided them with contextual insight and communication. The reflection of their own identity and schooling experiences informed their college programming.

Institutional Continuity and Deep School-Site Knowledge

In addition to cultural alignment, participants' long-term connections to their school sites provided a stable foundation for relationship-building. All three had previously served as teachers at the high schools where they now function as college counselors. Their institutional history provided them with credibility and trust among students, families, and colleagues.

One adviser, previously a math teacher, reflected on the shift in perspective required when transitioning from classroom instruction to school-wide college advising:

> "Every teacher is the king of their own little castle in the classroom, but we're all part of a bigger machine…we all have to move in the same direction."

This broader systems perspective, coupled with her established presence on campus, allowed her to design and implement programming informed by both school culture and student needs.

The college counselor's connection was particularly deep-rooted: she had been a student at the very school where she now advises. Her trajectory—from student to teacher, AVID coordinator, and then college counselor—exemplifies the power of institutional continuity. She was initially hesitant to apply for the college counselor role, but a Latina principal encouraged her to consider how her community ties and lived experience could support the growth of the school's college center. She recalled the moment as pivotal:

> "She asked me to apply, and I said no—I was happy in my role. But then she said it again. She reminded me that I knew this community and could really help it grow. That made me think differently."

All three college counselors' prior experiences at their school site increased staff's and students' trust in them. This allowed teachers to do a warm hand off to them when students had a college question. They were able to gain access more rapidly to certain systems because they already knew the school culture, which allowed them to build a programming structure that responded to the particular needs of the school population and eliminated friction between other school stakeholders and the college counselors. This allowed the counselors to keep building and establishing relationships with students through adults that they trusted, even if it was not directly the college counselor.

Mentorship and Role Modeling in Practice

Participants viewed themselves not only as information providers but also as role models and mentors. Their personal stories of overcoming barriers to college were used to validate students' experiences and provide hope. They described how informal mentorship during their

own high school years influenced their educational trajectories—and how they now strive to offer that intentional guidance to others.

One of the college counselor's shifts into her role was itself the result of mentorship from a school leader. Recognizing the impact of this encouragement, she now positions herself as a mentor to her students, helping them navigate the sociocultural and institutional challenges of college-going. This experience of mentorship shaped her own advising philosophy, particularly her belief in sustaining open lines of communication with students and never limiting their aspirations. She recounted supporting a student with autism who struggled academically yet persisted through college with her encouragement. "Never say never, never tell a kid they can't do something," she emphasized. She recounted numerous instances in which she used her own experiences—conversations with parents, financial responsibilities, and feelings of uncertainty—as springboards for authentic, empathetic advising.

The college counselors' ability to be a role model for their students, to show them that they were Latine and were able to not only enter college but finish, enabled students to see people that look like them in their school sites (as teachers, counselors, administrators) and to believe that they can attend and complete college. The college adviser stated that a lot of her first-generation students had to face similar obligations and challenges as she had growing up, such as bearing the responsibility to translate for the family, to contribute financially by working, and to assist in siblings' childcare. She identified a shared motivation for academic success, specifically to be able to financially support family. She identified with her students' experience of anticipatory impostor syndrome. "I totally like understand where they're coming from." The college adviser went on to note that her own parents also had limited knowledge of the American educational system. Relating to her students from her own shared background and experience, she stated she was sensitive to her students' need for guidance and mentorship with regard to the college selection process, and the culture shock associated with going to college. This sense of shared background and goals allowed the counselors to establish a shorthand ability to communicate about common concerns and to develop their relationships with their students. The hope is that the students will then pay it forward and mentor other peers or siblings.

Programming and Outreach as Vehicles for College Knowledge and Connection

Beyond individual relationships, participants engaged students through programming designed to demystify college knowledge and normalize postsecondary planning. As noted all three college counselors served student populations that were over 93% Latine and 100% socioeconomically disadvantaged. Within this context, programming became a central tool for both information dissemination and relationship-building.

Counselors described the delivery of workshops, application sessions, and grade-level interventions as opportunities not only to teach, but to connect. By consistently showing up in students' lives through these structured events, they built familiarity and trust. As one counselor explained, these repeated touchpoints made the college process feel less intimidating and helped establish her as a reliable source of support.

The college counselors expressed that programming is the most efficient way to be visible to students to allow them to grow relationships with the student population since, as one counselor put it, "we help the entire school". The college counselors ensure that students are able to see what the college center can offer as support. One college counselor has made sure that when 9th graders are brought on campus the college center is part of the tour so they are aware from Day 1 where she is located.

All three participants stated that individualized interactions are focused primarily on seniors during fall semester, and juniors and seniors during spring semester. One college counselor stated, "staff might think that it's, you know, applications, and then you're done. But it's so much more than that. So, it takes everything on the whole team just to progress, monitor them throughout the whole year. Um, but every year, we run into the same problem, we've spent so much time and focus on 12th grade that 9th through 11th grade is not really getting the support and preparation they need." The second college adviser stated, "We're just so capped on what we already do and what fundamentally there's a need to make sure that they get there, get all this stuff done, make sure that they're aware of like things that they have to do over summer so that they don't go to that summer melt. That, that's another layer that we're not ready or prepared for."

While programming provided structure to help manage the large caseload, participants emphasized that their success hinged on the relational trust they had built through shared identity and long-term presence at their school sites. Programming, therefore, functioned not as a standalone strategy, but as an initiation of the deeper diálogo they cultivated with students to enable transmission of relevant and effective college knowledge.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study highlights the critical role that college counselors and advisers play in supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students, particularly through culturally responsive diálogo, shared lived experiences, and long-term institutional commitment. The findings suggest that effective college counseling is deeply relational, requiring time, trust, and an understanding of students' sociocultural contexts. However, these efforts are often constrained by structural barriers, including limited staffing, high caseloads, and insufficient access to professional development (Bryan et al., 2011; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Roderick et al., 2008).

In response to the first subquestion—how college counselors and advisers establish relationships with socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students around college knowledge—the data revealed that participants drew upon shared linguistic and cultural ties, often using Spanish to build rapport and convey complex college processes in more accessible ways. Their prior roles as teachers at their school sites allowed them to enter students' lives with a level of familiarity and credibility that helped establish relational trust. Regarding the second subquestion—they support students around college knowledge—participants provided targeted, sustained, and often personalized support, including application workshops, one-on-one advising, and parent outreach. Their efforts sought to demystify college and the college selection and application process, while addressing students' cultural and familial contexts.

Notably in the California context, the college counselor held a formal counseling credential while the advisers did not; however, all three participants functioned as central figures in their schools' college-going efforts, operating from within the College Center and drawing on their institutional knowledge and embeddedness in the school community. Even though their credentialing status was different, all three described the same process of attending conferences to obtain the latest college knowledge information to provide to their students. In this section, I expand upon these systemic challenges and offer recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

Addressing Structural Challenges through Policy: Counselor Caseloads and Resource Inequities

A key challenge raised by all participants, that can be addressed with policy changes, was the overwhelming student-to-counselor ratio. These massive caseloads limited their ability to provide sustained, individualized support (Bryan et al., 2011; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Roderick et al., 2008). While participants demonstrated a strong commitment to their students, they expressed frustration that large caseloads reduced the time available for relationship-building and proactive college advising. Additionally, participants noted that professional development opportunities were limited by both scheduling constraints and insufficient funding. Despite their desire to remain current on evolving college admissions information and best practices, they were often unable to attend trainings or conferences due to the demands of their roles (Blake, 2020; Ensor, 2005; Vela Gude et al., 2009).

These limitations drive home the need for systemic investment in school-based college counseling. A central recommendation emerging from this study is the hiring of additional college counselors to reduce caseloads and increase student access to intentional, meaningful support (Bryan et al., 2011). Districts and state education agencies should provide funding for both the expansion of college counseling staff and the professional development required to equip them with relevant, up-to-date college knowledge and networking opportunities. Without this investment, counselors are left to operate reactively rather than proactively, which undermines efforts to close equity gaps in college access.

Each participant interviewed expressed the desire to have at least one more full-time person to support programming. Currently, each participant effectively triaged individualized support to focus on seniors during the fall semester, expanding just to include juniors in the spring semester. They relied on broader programming to reach underclassmen at all. Given that these are solo counselors, districts should consider creating more formalized mentorship pipelines that support counselors in entering and advancing within the profession.

While all three college centers in this study benefited from partnerships with nonprofit organizations, participants emphasized that access to nonprofit resources was often limited to students who met narrow eligibility criteria. As a result, a two-tiered advising system sometimes emerged, where only a subset of students received enhanced services. This highlights the importance of modifying school policies by integrating nonprofit support within a broader, school-wide framework to ensure equitable access to resources for all students, not just those who qualify for external programs.

Strengthening Counselor Practice: Leveraging Cultural Responsiveness and Community Knowledge

Despite systemic barriers, the participants in this study consistently leveraged their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as their histories as first-generation college students, to build trust with students and families. Their commitment to culturally sustaining practices enabled them to navigate difficult conversations around topics such as going away to college, family obligations, and financial constraints. These interactions were made possible through ongoing diálogo, grounded in empathy, mutual respect, and shared experience.

To support and scale this type of relationship-based advising, schools and districts can invest in training focused on cultural responsiveness and community engagement. While these participants were all Latine and personally shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds in common with their students, but not every college counselor may have similar personal backgrounds as their student population. Thus, professional development that values counselors' lived experiences but which also provides all counselors with frameworks—such as community cultural wealth or funds of knowledge—can broadly deepen practitioners' capacity to affirm and draw upon students' cultural assets and backgrounds. Professional development that exposes practitioners to their relevant communities' culturally specific backgrounds, expectations and challenges would help college counselors to establish connections, trust and lines of communications necessary to transmit college knowledge.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers insight into college counselor perspectives and practices, it is limited in several important ways. First, data collection occurred during the period immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were still grappling with the ramifications of extended disruption. Future research should examine how the pandemic has reshaped the role of college counselors and what long-term adaptations have emerged to support students' postsecondary transitions.

Second, the focus on Latine students—most of whom self-identified as being of Mexican heritage—is one small subset of broader Latine population with room for deeper exploration within this culture. For example, while shared cultural identity facilitated relationship-building in this study, future research should attend more explicitly to the intersectionality of student identities, including citizenship status, racial identification, language proficiency, and gender and sexuality (Pérez, 2009, 2011). Understanding how these overlapping identities influence students' experiences with college counseling is essential to designing more equitable and inclusive support systems for this population.

Moreover, while this study centers on counselor and adviser perspectives, further research is needed to examine students' own experiences of college advising. How do students perceive their relationships with counselors? In what ways do they make meaning of the guidance they receive? And how do systemic factors—such as school climate, funding, and access to external supports—shape those experiences? Exploring these types of questions in the future could be beneficial in painting a clearer picture of the ways in which Latine students draw upon their agency and perceive the college counselor support they receive.

Conclusion

Counselors and advisers who share students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences are uniquely positioned to engage in meaningful diálogo that affirms students' identities and transmits personally relevant college information. However, to fully realize the potential of this work, structural changes are necessary—specifically, reducing caseloads, investing in professional development, and ensuring equitable access to support across all student populations. By centering relationship-building and addressing the systemic barriers that constrain counselors' capacity, schools can more effectively support the postsecondary aspirations of socioeconomically disadvantaged Latine students.

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A Case for Increasing Accessibility of School Counselor Supervision through Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

School counselors face many challenges in accessing and engaging in clinical supervision. Research indicates that once school counselors enter the field, they must seek supervision independently. Over the past several years, teachers have increasingly engaged in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to learn and collaboratively engage in reflective practices aimed at improving student outcomes. The author provides an overview of the current state of school counselor supervision and proposes a method to address the need for school counselor supervision through the use of PLCs. To provide a practical example, I end the article with a case study example.

Introduction

School counselors play a crucial role in student success, positively impacting students' academic, career, and social-emotional development (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). For instance, to successfully influence student achievement, school counselors are responsible for developing and delivering a comprehensive, data-driven school counseling program. In doing so, school counselors should allocate 80% of their time to direct service to students, which includes providing classroom lessons, consulting with teachers, administrators, and staff members, as well as offering short-term individual and small-group counseling. The role of the school counselor encompasses a wide range of skills, including individual and small-group counseling, and school counselors utilize these skills to address various needs. Providing counseling to students is a crucial aspect of the role and function of school counselors (ASCA, 2019). However, once school counselors enter the workforce, many are not required to continue to hone their counseling skills or participate in clinical supervision (Brott et al., 2021). Given the complexity of cases school counselors encounter daily, such as grief and loss, child abuse, or suicidal ideation, school counselors must possess strong clinical counseling skills and supervisory support from individuals who are knowledgeable of school counselors' responsibilities (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Tang, 2020). Many school counselors desire supervision to continue improving their clinical counseling skills and better support students (Chae, 2022). School counselor supervision is a vital aspect of the continued personal and professional development of school counselors once they enter the workforce (Brott et al., 2021). However, there are still challenges to school counselors accessing and engaging in supervision (Chae & Backer, 2024). In many states, clinical mental health counselors, on the other hand, are required to continue supervision for licensing purposes (Bryant et al., 2020; Tang, 2020). Moreover, the knowledge and skills present within clinical supervision are necessary for all counseling professionals to acquire and develop (Bernard & Luke, 2015).

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) sought to develop a formal supervision training model, which led to the establishment of a task force to provide practitioners with specific guidance on their daily supervision practices. Thus, the *Best Practices in Clinical Supervision* were developed to provide practitioners with a review of current literature on supervision, legal precedents, and supervision expertise from a range of supervision practitioners (Borders et al., 2014). These standards and best practices ensured that professional guidelines were in place to offer consistency throughout the profession, protecting supervisors, supervisees, and clients while simultaneously developing supervisees and ensuring the welfare of clients (ACES, 2011). Overall, while there exist many models of supervision for school counselors and an ongoing need to support school counselors' practice through supervision, there remain challenges with integrating school counseling supervision within K-12 schools. As such, the goal of this article is to suggest how practicing school counselors can implement supervision models within systems already in place within schools: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were developed as a means for educators to collaborate with colleagues in examining student data to optimize student outcomes (Preast & Burns, 2019; Griffen & Hallett, 2017). PLCs infuse reflection to identify methods to remedy challenges that arise day to day (Griffen & Hallett, 2017). Since many professional development opportunities were previously offered at conferences or workshops, PLCs afford educators an opportunity for collaboration within the school day and school setting (Thigpen et al., 2024). Given the increased implementation of PLCs in K-12 education in recent years, schools that implement PLCs with fidelity, retention, and efficacy are positively impacted. (Thigpen et al., 2024). According to Hudson (2023):

> A Professional Learning Community is a group of educators motivated by continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and mutual goal alignment, who engage collaboratively in professional learning to increase educator effectiveness and improve student outcomes. This is achieved by the educators sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, inclusive, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting way, underpinned by a high level of collegial trust and a supportive school environment. (p. 652)

Mainly, Hudson (2023) identified four key elements of PLCs required to implement PLCs effectively: "enabling school structures, shared vision and values, collegial trust, and collaborative, reflective practice" (p. 652). As such, school counselors can utilize these four elements as a foundation and a focus for engaging in their PLCs. First, *enabling school structures* is identified as school leadership being supportive of the work and mutual trust within

individuals' respective roles within a school community. Next, *shared vision and values* align everyone around a common goal, providing strategic direction for the PLC. Additionally, *collegial trust* is an interdependence and mutual trust among colleagues. Lastly, *collaborative, reflective practice* is a process in which all PLC members' engagement allows members to reflect upon what can be done in future professional practice (Hudson, 2023). Thus, these four strategies can be utilized as a foundation and to drive the goals of school counselor-specific PLCs.

Although there has been excitement around the use of PLCs to collaboratively engage in determining best practices to improve student outcomes (Southall, 2023), the literature on school counselors' use of PLCs is sparse. Southall (2023) investigated how the implementation of a PLC impacts school counselors' perception of adequately performing the duties of a PLC, using data to problem-solve and understand the benefits and challenges of PLC implementation. The findings conclude that school counselors could effectively implement a PLC and use data within the context of the collaborative meeting, and also found benefits and challenges to the implementation. With the purpose of PLCs to learn to benefit student outcomes (Hudson, 2023), PLCs can be an optimal opportunity for school counselors to engage in peer supervision. Research indicates that the effective implementation of PLCs could lead to the improvement of student outcomes (Hudson, 2023; Preast & Burns, 2019).

School Counselor Supervision

Supervision is an intervention provided by a more advanced member of a profession to a novice colleague who is likely a member of the same profession (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). The supervisory relationship covers a specific time frame, is evaluative, and is designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of the supervisee to ensure the client's well-being (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Research has proven that engagement in clinical supervision enhances counseling skills, decreases chances of burnout, combats stress, prevents burnout, and is essential in a field that consistently evolves (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012). School counseling literature noting the need for school counselor supervision dates back several decades; here, scholars likened supporting school counselors once they enter the profession to a cactus—expecting to survive and thrive on limited resources despite the lack of opportunity for personal and professional development (Brott et al., 2021). Calls for school counselor supervision date back to the late 1960s (O'Hara, 1968), yet no widespread implementation of school counselor supervision has been enacted (Chae & Backer, 2024; Bjornestad et al., 2014).

Supervision is a direct avenue through which school counselors can receive feedback and support designed to improve professional skills and counseling competency (Duncan et al., 2014; Lambie, 2007). Supervision is critical in developing the ethical decision-making skills of school counselors' clients and stakeholders. Indeed, Culbreath et al. (2005) found that supervision is related to lower stress levels among school counselors. Researchers have also found that the amount of supervision received is a significant predictor and an essential tool for

overcoming burnout in school counselors (Lambie, 2007; Moyer, 2011). In addition, clinical supervision was found to be a protective factor in school counselor burnout (Culbreath et al., 2005). Although the necessity of school counselor supervision is often cited, clinical supervision has yet to establish a significant presence in school counseling contexts (Luke & Bernard, 2006). Tang (2020) examined school counselor self-efficacy and the implementation of peer supervision. As such, the author found that supervision specific to school counselors can increase school counselor efficacy within professional practice.

Research demonstrates the lack of clinical counseling supervision for school counselors despite the desire (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012). Challenges to school counselors' supervision include limited access to qualified supervisors trained in clinical supervision, a limited number of school counselors willing to supervise, working in remote locations, and time constraints to provide counseling supervision (Merlin & Brendel, 2017). In addition, often, within school contexts, school counselors are isolated from professional development opportunities with a focus on the work of teachers (Southall, 2023). However, researchers have asserted that the underutilization of clinical supervision may be due to a focus on the development of comprehensive school counseling programs by ASCA as opposed to the development of the school counselor (Luke & Bernard, 2006). Supervision practices vary by state, with many states not requiring continuing education or supervision once they begin professional practice (Tang, 2020).

Quintana and Gooden-Alexis (2020) noted that there are three essential types of supervision that school counselors should receive equitably—counseling supervision, programmatic supervision, and administrative supervision. However, when 1,557 practicing school counselors were surveyed, 89% of participants reported receiving any form of supervision (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012). Moreover, of the participants receiving supervision, 63% reported receiving only administrative supervision from principals or administrators who focus solely on administrative tasks rather than competence and counseling skills. One reason attributed to the lack of available school counselor supervision is the perception of their role by the school administration (Herlihy et al., 2002). Administrators may perceive the school counselor's role as primarily academic advising, scheduling, and group guidance, and may think school counselor participation in supervision deters from their direct service to students (Herlihy et al., 2002).

Supervision can provide instances of ongoing clinical skill development and ongoing consultation regarding legal and ethical considerations (Bryant-Young et al., 2020). Researchers posit that the development of professional identity is imperative to one's professional development of school counselors (Gilbride et al., 2016). Furthermore, the professional development of school counselors has been proven to improve outcomes for students and enhance school counselors' professional well-being and identity (Brott et al., 2021). School counselors are considered lagging behind other counseling professionals, in incorporating supervision within their professional practice (Swank & Tyson, 2012). Brott et al. (2021)

suggested that supervision should be incorporated into school counselors' professional development plans and annual administrative conferences. Overall, one method of supervision that has been proven to be successful for school counselors, yet underutilized, is peer supervision (Wilkerson, 2006).

Peer Supervision

Peer supervision is a collaborative and practical approach to supervision that provides school counselors with an opportunity for supervision that extends beyond administrative supervision offered by school leaders (Chae, 2022; Wilkerson, 2006). Unlike clinical supervision which incorporates a power differential of a supervisor who provides evaluative feedback (Wilkerson, 2006), peer supervision provides a collaborative experience for school counselors to use their existing network of school counselors, which can help further their professional goals (Chae, 2022). In peer supervision and consultation models, a collaborative and collegial approach is offered in place of the evaluative supervisory relationship in traditional supervision (Butler & Constantine, 2006). Though peer supervision and consultation have historically been used interchangeably, Wilkerson (2006) offered the following definition to capture the totality of the peer supervision experience for school counselors,

> Peer supervision is a structured, supportive process in which counselor colleagues (or trainees), in pairs or in groups, use their professional knowledge and relationship expertise to monitor practice and effectiveness on a regular basis to improve specific counseling, conceptualization, and theoretical skills (Wilkerson, 2006, pg. 62).

Thus, school counselors engaging in peer supervision provide a process in which they can have collective responsibility for the students they serve.

Rationale for School Counselor Supervision Using Professional Learning Communities

Supervision has been a long-standing need within the profession (Brott et al., 2021). Given the current literature on supervision, the following rationale is provided to support the combination of Peer Supervision and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). According to the ASCA Ethical Standards (2022) school counselors should seek supervision, as needed. Given the increased rates of PLC implementation already in place in K-12 schools, incorporating supervision into the PLCs would benefit the profession by providing an avenue through which school counselors can expand their professional knowledge during the workday and on-site.

According to recent findings, school counselors found that PLC implementation was beneficial to their ongoing professional development (Southall, 2023). The benefits of school counselors' use of PLCs include collaboration, collective problem-solving, shared learning, validation of their experiences, and the incorporation of new practices (Southall, 2023). In addition, school counselors in the study found that PLCs were a necessary component of their professional

development (Southall, 2023). When investigating how school counselors utilize and experience PLCs, King (2020) found that school counselors experience PLCs as an opportunity to build community and culture among one another, and a place for unity and cohesion. Additionally, PLCs also offer the essential feature of protected time (King, 2020). Administrators who provide administrative supervision and advocate for time and PLC resources are essential (King, 2020).

Peer supervision provides a collaborative space for school counselors to foster growth, professional development, rapport building, and support among colleagues (Chae, 2022). Furthermore, peer supervision among colleagues offers a network of knowledge with whom school counselors can consult to develop collective problem-solving. Since supervision promotes ethical practice and accountability (Chae & Backer, 2023), colleagues can consult to offer their perspectives, and school counselors can be held accountable to their colleagues to follow through regarding the outcome of the situation (Chae, 2022). Dedicated supervision time through PLCs would also provide time to reflect on the progress of individuals and small groups and discuss referral opportunities, interventions, and theoretical approaches. Consequently, as school counselors are nurtured through supervision, they, in turn, are better equipped to confidently influence systemic change and advocate for all students as they are increasingly more confident in their abilities (Springer et al., 2017).

Potential Challenges

While there are many benefits, it is important to consider challenges when implementing peer supervision through PLCs. One challenge is buy-in from the administration and district leadership. Although PLCs are widespread throughout K-12, a hurdle is gaining buy-in and support from building administrators and district personnel to protect school counselors' PLC time in the same way they do for teachers. Since teachers have tangible results from their PLC work with students (i.e., outcome data), school counselors must advocate that an investment in their clinical counseling skills will, in turn, positively impact students' academic, career, and social/emotional outcomes. Additionally, although school counselors will engage in supervision, PLCs are the method through which peer supervision is achieved, which may cause some confusion among school leaders who are not well-versed in school counseling practices. Given the nature of school counselors' work, an additional challenge is the support that will be needed while school counselors are attending their PLCs, such as available support personnel to tend to crises that arise. Similarly, in schools in rural areas, with limited staff members or staff members who split their time between buildings, having uninterrupted time for PLCs may be increasingly complex. Considering that some school counselors may be the only ones in their buildings, there may be difficulty in ensuring a consensus with PLC time (Southall, 2023) across levels and school start times.

Case Study Example

The purpose of this case study is to demonstrate how school counselors can utilize peer supervision through PLCs. The following case study is fictious and designed to illustrate specifically how school counselors can engage with supervision, given the context of peer supervision within PLCs.

Manigo County School District adopted a plan for all school counselors to engage in peer supervision during PLCs. Since school counselors have experienced challenges in accessing supervision and teachers have protected time during their planning periods, the school district has agreed to school counselors meeting in their PLCs for 60-90 minutes every other week. As such, by ensuring they have the same protected time as teachers, the Manigo school counselors engaged in peer supervision through their PLC.

To start, the school district communicated its expectations for school counselors to work together to engage in peer supervision and provided an exemplar for school counselors, as a way to engage in peer supervision. Relatedly, the Manigo County School Counseling District Coordinator organized all school counselors into PLC groups of 3-4 members per group; their organization was based on their school location and level. Next, to mitigate interruptions during their PLCs, the school district and principals ensured that the school social worker or school psychologist is on campus to address any crises that arise during their PLC time. The goal is for the PLC time to be primarily consultative and collaborative rather than evaluative; as such, the group of three to four school counselors shifted responsibility across each of these PLC members. Sample activities included: guiding the conversations, case conceptualizations, and goals. Members came to PLC meetings equipped to discuss cases, and they followed ethical and legal guidelines set forth by the school district and ASCA (2022). Next, the members of each Manigo County PLC created a schedule, ensuring that their group meets regularly: eight to ten times per semester. The district requested bi-monthly documentation of their PLC meetings, attendees, and a general overview of their discussion, excluding confidential or sensitive information. Members of each PLC were also encouraged to bring challenging, non-immediate concerns they needed to process with the group. As a result of these school counselor PLC groups, members hold one another accountable to their supervision and professional development goals, as well as add an additional layer of support.

To share specifics, Austin is one of two school counselors at her middle school and is in her fourth year as a school counselor. Blake is a first-year school counselor at one of their feeder elementary schools and is the only school counselor in his building. He joins Austin and her co-counselor, Danielle, for a PLC peer supervision through a video conferencing platform. Danielle is in her 11th year as a school counselor, but recently transitioned to middle school after working as an elementary school counselor.

In their initial meeting, they followed the guidelines from the Manigo County School District, which included establishing rapport and discussing their personal goals for supervision during PLCs. They identified areas of growth and ways they wanted to improve their clinical counseling skills. During PLC supervision, Austin desired to focus on her use of Motivational Interviewing (MI) with students on her caseload and talk through a case conceptualization of a student, Niha. Since Blake is a new school counselor, he wanted to run small groups every 8 weeks to address areas found in his program assessment. Danielle disaggregated data from their school's Sense of Belonging survey and therefore aimed to develop a small group to address her findings. In this first PLC meeting, Danielle consulted with the group about an ethical dilemma she was experiencing. Blake and Austin suggested referencing the ASCA Ethical Standards (2022) to help resolve the issue. After they discussed Danielle's pressing concern as a part of their routine check-in with one another, they moved on to working through their individual goals. In their next PLC meeting, the group followed up with Danielle about how she handled the ethical dilemma, and Danielle shared her responses with her PLC group. She thanked the group for their quick thinking to reference the ethical standards and shared her appreciation for their accountability through their follow-up. In their third PLC meeting, Blake discussed challenges with a student in one of his counseling small groups. Blake wanted the student to be a part of the group, but is having difficulty with some of the behaviors the student displays during the group meeting time. The student desires a connection with other students but exhibits behaviors that demonstrate the opposite. Blake shared his actions so far to address the student's behavior, and then Austin and Danielle offered their perspectives to Blake to try to help remedy the situation. At their next meeting, Blake shared which interventions he used and thanked the group for collaboratively helping him problem solve through peer supervision in the PLC. Blake particularly appreciated using peer supervision since he is the only school counselor in his school, so having Austin and Danielle has been beneficial for support with his students. Since Austin was working through her use of MI, she shared with the group her successes and growth edges for using MI with students on her caseload. Blake suggested a text he used during his school counselor training program that could be helpful to Austin as she continues to develop her use of MI.

Discussion

The case study example demonstrated how school counselors can incorporate peer supervision PLCs to ensure their continued development using a network of school counselors within their school or school district. The illustration depicts a school district's adoption of PLCs that include school counselors; however, school counselors can also utilize the guidelines discussed and advocate with their principal and supervising administrator to allocate protected time for peer supervision. Since school counselors address a plethora of needs within schools, having additional staff on hand during the 60-90 minute PLC time is critical to provide urgent supports as needed.

The case study also demonstrates the utility of varied developmental levels of school counselors. Although Danielle has more years of counseling experience, Blake was able to offer her a resource that was helpful to him as a recent graduate. Danielle recently transitioned to middle school and offered Blake peer supervision around the student in his small group. Ultimately, the school counselors in the case study bring a range of concerns to the group, which depicts the collaborative, supportive culture that PLCs can provide. In addition, accountability is an essential feature of peer supervision. As group members meet, they become accountable to one another and have a shared interest in building community.

The case study demonstrates several key principles within PLC research—shared vision and values, collegial trust, and collaborative reflective practice (Hudson, 2023). The three school counselors depicted possess a shared vision and values of self-improvement that benefit student outcomes (Christensen, 2025). As such, school counselors approach peer supervision to collaboratively problem solve, thus fostering an environment of collegial trust that their colleagues are competent in their professional knowledge and skills, and reliable (Hudson, 2023). As evidenced by Danielle's ethical issue shared during PLC, she was confident in her PLC members' professional knowledge and utilized their suggestions to reference the ethical standards in question. Next, Blake demonstrates collaborative, reflective practice where he shares his past work in addressing a student's behavior. In reflecting with his PLC members, he was able to recall the interventions he attempted with his student in an effort to remedy the student's behavior. As a result, Blake's PLC members offered possible solutions he could attempt to promote students' social and emotional development. Similarly, peer supervision provides an opportunity for school counselors to foster growth and development amongst one another in a supportive environment (Chae, 2022). Thus, it is essential that to successfully implement PLCs, school counselors must utilize key tenets of PLCs, while also incorporating similar elements of peer supervision.

Implications for Practice

School counselors engaging in PLCs during contractual hours will help bridge the gap present in school counselor supervision over the last several decades; such gaps include: limited time to engage in professional development, limited funding, and a lack of trained and qualified clinical supervisors. However, these challenges may be mitigated by engaging in peer supervision in PLCs. By incorporating supervision, school counselors may have greater self-efficacy regarding their clinical counseling skills and increased collaboration among team members. For experienced school counselors, supervision can be an opportunity to engage in best practices and stay up to date on current trends, and novice counselors can feel supported with structured supports in place as they transition into the workforce and reemphasize the need for supervision throughout professional practice (Chae, 2022). Given the complexity of cases that school counselors face daily, they can ensure collaboration in order to mitigate burnout (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012).

Implications for Research

The literature on school counselor supervision is intermittent and largely out-of-date (Chae & Backer, 2024). Therefore, more research is needed. I recommend that scholars conduct an empirical study, to evaluate the effectiveness of peer supervision through PLCs. Such research could aim to thoroughly understand the benefits and areas of improvement needed for addressing school counselor peer supervision through PLCs. Next, the ASCA Counseling Competencies indicate that school counselors must seek supervision on their own. Thus, further research can investigate the prevalence of and factors that contribute to school counselors' usage of clinical supervision that they sought on their own. Additionally, further research can investigate school counselor self-efficacy while engaging in peer supervision using PLCs. Since the need for school counselor supervision has been a longstanding topic of conversation within the profession, measures should be taken to ensure this topic is addressed further to enhance school counselors' personal and professional development.

Conclusion

Incorporating peer supervision in school counselor professional practice through PLCs can provide school counselors with increased efficacy in meeting students' academic, career, and social/emotional needs, including mental health needs. To address the systemic barriers to supervision, school counselors can begin to bridge the gap in supervision by incorporating guidelines for establishing peer supervision to ensure the successful implementation of supervision through PLCs. To conclude, incorporating peer supervision within PLCs provides an opportunity to enhance school counselors' professional knowledge by improving their clinical counseling skills, support with ethical concerns, and a growing network of school counselors. Calls for school counselor supervision have spanned several decades, and now, it is more vital than ever that school counselors are supported to address the growing demands of the role. In sum, school counselor supervision benefits school counselors, students, and school counseling programs by increasing school counselors' confidence and their professional knowledge.

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Boosting Student Well-Being: A Pilot Study in a High-Needs Upper Secondary School

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to improve psychological well-being and decrease perceived stress of students who attended a high-needs secondary school. A substantial proportion of the students were Black, or from economically marginalized backgrounds, and/or with chronic attendance issues. The school counselor, using a trauma-informed and culturally affirming lens, provided classroom lessons from Fava's Well-being Therapy school protocol (WBT-SP). The results indicated an increase in overall well-being, environmental mastery, and personal growth. In addition, female students in particular, reported a significant decrease in perceived stress over time. The implications of this study suggest the WBT-SP is a useful framework to support students in racially and culturally diverse school settings.

Introduction

Stress disproportionately affects people of racial/ethnic status and low socio-economic status (APA, 2018). Students who belong to multiple marginalized and oppressed social groups will face a greater quantity, frequency, and intensity of challenges when compared to their majority peers (Marks et al., 2020). When school counselors are working in a high-needs school where students experience more trauma and stress, they must be aware of the worldviews of their students. Traumatic events can influence the social/emotional and academic success of students, however receiving support can be pivotal in student growth and their subsequent school journey (Alvarez et al., 2022). Due to working and living in the same community, the author of this article was aware of the environmental stressors and trauma students endured related to gun violence, death of parents, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, housing insecurity, and food insecurity. The American School Counselor Association's position statement includes, "through the implementation of a school counseling program, school counselors strive to identify, support, and promote the success of students who have experienced trauma" (ASCA, 2022). Furthermore, examining trauma from a socio-cultural perspective allows school counselors to connect students to suitable resources and services (Alvarez et al., 2022). Understanding that 70%-80% of students will only receive counseling services from schools (Atkins et al., 2010), it is imperative that school counselors provide interventions to improve resilience and coping skills.

In the school counselor's experience, seniors in high school received a significant amount of support academically and with college and career planning. However, she was concerned if students were adequately equipped with tools to cope with life's stressors once they graduated. Several graduated students shared with the school counselor, due to stressors or trauma-related issues, they were unprepared to continue with their post-secondary plans. While some students met with the school counselor individually for help with emotional

challenges, the school counselor was concerned about students who did not seek emotional support. Although there could be several reasons for the lack of connections with some students, Steen et al. (2023) states a possible explanation for Black males, may be due to their limited or previous negative experience with school counselors. The results of a research study by Mayes, et al. (2021) found many Black girls felt invisible by their school counselor and viewed the school counselor as more transactional with limited interactions around social/emotional development. Therefore, the school counselor of the current study turned to large group counseling using classroom lessons to reach a greater number of students, and for students to become more familiar with her. Oftentimes, classroom lessons serve as an introduction to the school counselor and offer an opportunity to provide a proactive, preventative approach to engage with all students on their caseload (Goodman-Scott, 2019). As skilled practitioners, school counselors can utilize several impactful therapeutic factors, such as imparting information, group cohesion, and interpersonal learning, during effective interventions (Steen et al., 2022). In addition, providing counseling lessons is considered professional best practice and are a fundamental part of the school counselors' roles (Goodman-Scott, 2019). Therefore, the school counselor understood large group, classroom lessons were the best way to reach students who could benefit from extra support before exiting high school.

This article describes a high school counselor's effort to enhance the psychological well-being and reduce perceived stress during the senior year of high school, by implementing a positive psychology evidence-based intervention. The purpose of the intervention was to enhance the protective/resiliency factors that mitigate the negative effects of psychological risks, preparing students to transition positively out of high school. In the next section, the effects of perceived stress and trauma on student development will be described. In addition, the role of trauma-informed school counselors, and the background of existing evidence-based psychological well-being interventions is discussed.

Literature Review

Perceived Stress of Minority Youth

The literature indicates perceived stress is significantly related to and a strong predictor of anxiety, depression, and mental well-being (Maddock, 2024). Furthermore, risk factors for psychological issues including stress and perceived stress are greater for REM (racial and ethnic minority) youth than White youth (DeLuca et al., 2022). As previously mentioned, this intervention was used with a sample of students from a school that was 69.4% African American and 58% of the student body described as economically disadvantaged. It has been found that those who identify with an oppressed minority status and/or those who belong to a less privileged class or socioeconomic group could experience more stress than peers belonging to a privileged group (Maykel et al., 2018). More specifically, research indicates Black and

brown youth, as well as those living in under resourced areas, may experience higher rates of adverse childhood experiences and trauma (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2019).
With risk factors of marginalized youth being greater for stress, coping skills to enhance psychological well-being is crucial. When proactive coping strategies are implemented, individuals have a greater ability to withstand challenging situations and protect their psychological wellbeing (Kumar et al., 2020). Marginalized adolescents may not have access to intervention efforts to prevent psychological issues (DeLuca et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to the stigma of attaining mental health services or lack of culturally competent providers, racial and ethnic minorities may not receive services for mental health care (DeLuca et al., 2022).

School Counselor Roles – Trauma Informed

School counselors are in an ideal position to support students exposed to trauma (Alvarez et al., 2022). Abuse, neglect, separation from family members, discrimination, bullying, substance abuse, and physical or mental illness are a few types of trauma children may encounter (Herrenkohl et al., 2019). The effect of trauma is a significant issue due to the adverse effects on physical and mental health, brain development, cognitive growth, emotional development and regulation, learning, and relationships (Johnson et al., 2022). It is reported that more than 60% of children experience some sort of trauma by the age of 16 (SAMHSA, 2020). The impact of traumatic experiences can extend into adulthood causing physical and psychological health problems, including conditions like depression and cancer (CDC, 2019).
When a child experiences one or more traumatic events, the school environment becomes crucial in delivering evidence-based interventions to foster resilience and enhance coping skills (Alvarez et al., 2022). If there are difficulties meeting challenges during this critical phase, there can be a long-lasting impact on well-being, with 62.5% of mental disorders presenting before age 25 (Solmi et al., 2022). Even more concerning, the peak age of onset for stress related disorders is 15.5 (Solmi et al., 2022). School counselors have a responsibility to help create a safe environment, sensitive to the traumatic experiences of students (Alvarez et al.,2022). Due to the various types of trauma students may undergo, the significant role of school counselors is heightened.

Culturally Sensitive, Trauma-Informed Interventions

An awareness of the various sociocultural influences as well traumatic experiences endured by students is crucial for school counselors to be most effective. Gherardi et al. (2020) reveals frameworks for trauma sensitive schools seem to exclude considerations for student sociocultural contexts. Therefore, it is essential for school counseling programs to consider social determinants of mental health when promoting and preventing mental health challenges (Johnson et al., 2023). Since the majority of student's time is spent in schools, it serves as an ideal location to promote mental health, especially since mental health challenges often surface during childhood (Johnson et al., 2023).

To ensure all students are receiving the support services they need, school counselors are positioned to provide accessible and equitable programs, including those for diverse youth that can help prevent or delay psychological issues (DeLuca, et, 2022). The ASCA's position statement on equity for all students (2024) states school counseling programs have a duty to advance equity and ensure access for all students. Equity and access extend to providing interventions to help students learn how to cope with challenges currently or in the future. A research study shows that 20% of students need mental health services, however only one in five will receive the needed the care (Erford, 2019). According to the National Center for School Mental Health (2019), 70-80% of students will receive mental health services within school-based settings. Understanding that school counselors may be the only accessible counseling professional to students and their families, the role of school counselors include recognizing mental health warning signs as well as providing instruction to promote positive, healthy behaviors, and mental health (ASCA 2020). Therefore, professional school counselors serve a pivotal role working from a culturally affirming and trauma-informed lens to help prevent future mental health issues of marginalized youth.

Well-Being Therapy

Positive psychology is the study of flourishing and optimal functioning, in other words, a person being and doing their best (Park & Peterson, 2008; Uyanik et al., 2017). High well-being occurs when someone is satisfied with their life and experiences joy at a higher frequency as opposed to sad emotions (Veenhoven, 2008).

An Italian psychiatrist, Givoanni Fava, developed the original model of Well-Being Therapy (WBT) to enhance psychological well-being and resilience (Fava, 2016). WBT is based on Ryff's (1989) conceptual model of psychological well-being. Ryff's model of Psychological Well-Being (PWB) determined there are six contributing factors of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). First, self-acceptance is described as having a positive attitude about oneself and one's past. It is also characterized as accepting unpleasant aspects of oneself. Second, positive relations with others are explained as being able to care, empathize, cooperate, and compromise with others to develop "warm, trusting interpersonal relationships" (Keyes, 2009, p. 11). Third, Ryff (1989) describes autonomy as being self-determined, independent, and aware of one's values. These characteristics allow the person to make his own decisions, confidently going against the grain of societal guidelines if needed. Fourth, environmental mastery includes recognizing potential situations or opportunities where personal needs can be benefited. It also includes managing and controlling daily activities. Fifth, purpose in life consists of objectives, goals, and direction to fulfill their meaning in life. Personal growth is the final dimension. It consists of working on skills, abilities, and opportunities to grow developmentally. Personal growth also entails being open to different experiences and challenges.

Several of these psychological well-being factors are closely interconnected with the concept of resilience. The ultimate goal of WBT is to lead clients toward a balanced, optimal level of functioning through the dimensions of PWB (Ruini & Fava, 2012). Specifically, WBT includes guided interventions that are composed of psychotherapeutic strategies to increase PWB and resilience (Fava et al., 2017).

Fava (2016) and his team of researchers created an educationally based modification to Well-Being Therapy called the Well-Being Therapy School Protocol (WBT-SP). Due to the inclusion of cognitive-behavioral therapy within the WBT-SP, the intervention is relatively short requiring only 4-6 sessions (Fava et al., 2017). Three Italian school-based studies, conducted by the program developers, utilized the WBT-SP (Weiss et al., 2016). The research design of the previous studies involved students with mean ages between 13.1 and 14.4 (Weiss et al., 2016). Results of previous studies indicated a statistically significant decrease in anxiety as well as significant gains in personal growth of students who participated in the WBT-SP.

These investigations showed that the WBT-SP is an adaptable and affordable positive psychology intervention for schools. Each study yielded promising results. The intervention includes specific objectives with activities that can be tailored to the school culture. Although the WBT-SP has not been used widely, it is a validated, established program of specific strategies useful in promoting psychological well-being in academic settings (Ruini et al, 2009; Fava, 2016). While the previous studies were conducted in Italy among students of a younger age group, it was believed the adaptability of the WBT-SP could extend to diverse populations globally. Therefore, this study explores the impact of the WBT-SP with 12th grade students attending a high-needs school in the Southeastern part of the United States. By using this program, the school counselor believed students who participated in the current study would improve their short and long-term well-being by enhancing protective/resiliency factors that mitigate the negative effects of psychological risks. Therefore, students would have the tools needed to transition out of high school and successfully proceed with their post-secondary plans.

Purpose of the Study

Transitions, such as graduating high school, provide a highly stressful time in students' lives. Students who attend high-needs schools may need additional support to strengthen their resiliency and emotionally prepare for life once they graduate. The purpose of this study was to ensure graduating students who attended a high-needs upper secondary school received the coping tools necessary to increase psychological well-being, resulting in a reduction of perceived stress. Therefore, this research study sought to answer the following questions after the implementation of the Well-being Therapy School Protocol intervention: (1) Will overall psychological well-being improve? (2) What dimensions of psychological well-being will improve? and (3) Will perceived stress decrease?

Method

Positionality

The author was a practicing school counselor at the time of this study and currently serves as an assistant professor/ graduate director of a professional school counseling program. She identifies as a Black woman of Caribbean descent, who is also a first-generation college graduate. She earned a master's degree in counseling, education specialist degree in counseling, and a doctorate in counselor education and supervision. Currently, she is an ASCA PSC Emerging Scholar.

This research holds personal significance to the author due to years of observing the impact stress had on her high school students' mental health and post-secondary future decisions. The author lived and worked as a school counselor in the same community as the study participants for over nineteen years, enabling her to build trust and strong community relationships in and out of the school. The shared geographical and cultural context helped shape the author's understanding of the participant's lived experiences.

Participants, Sampling and Setting.

Precautions were taken to protect student rights. The investigator/school counselor met with the building principal and the deputy superintendent to describe the WBT-SP and goals for implementation. After approval from the participating school district was complete, final approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained.

Next, an overview of the purpose, goals, and topics was shared with students in their classes. In addition, the researcher/school counselor discussed there were no repercussions if they chose not to participate. The researcher also expressed that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Finally, the limits of confidentiality were discussed, and students had an opportunity to ask questions for further clarification. Afterwards, the students completed written, informed consent forms, and the author kept them in a secure location. Communication with parents was completed via email and by letters sent home. The information sent home was similar to the information shared with students in their classrooms. Parents had the opportunity to decide if their children would participate by completing an opt-out form or by sending a note to the school counseling office.

Convenience sampling was utilized with intact groups that the researcher had direct access to. Three 12th grade government courses were given a pre-assessment to measure perceived stress levels. The two classes with the most similar pre-assessment scores were targeted to participate in the study. The classes were assigned randomly to either the intervention group or the wait-list comparison group, and both groups subsequently received the intervention. There were a total 45 students involved in this study, 26 (57.8%) male and 19 (42.2%) female, with a

mean age of 17.47 (*SD* = .59). However, due to state assessments and chronic attendance issues, the results of this study were analyzed from 30 students (16 male; 14 female) who attended all 6 sessions of the WBT-SP yielding a response rate of 66.7%. The research context was a public high school located in an urban city in the southeast United States. Over 60% of its population receiving free or reduced lunch, and the racial and ethnic composition was 69.4% (African American), 17.8% (White), 6.5% (two or more races), and 5.3% (Hispanic). Per the school district's guidelines, the exact demographic composition of the classes could not be collected. It is important to note that 20.71% of the students attending the participating school were defined as chronically absent, ultimately affecting the final sample.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were employed to assess student outcomes. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen, et al., (1983) is a two-dimensional construct that has questions referring to distress and coping (Lee & Jeong, 2019). The PSS is a 10-item self-rating instrument measuring participant appraisal of their lives in terms of being stressful. It is suggested that the PSS be administered to individuals with at least a junior high school level of education (Cohen, 1994). The PSS scores can range from 0 - 40, with the larger numbers representing higher levels of perceived stress. According to Cohen (1994), the measure has adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .79). It is suggested that the PSS be used with those with at least a junior high school education (Cohen, 1994)

Ryff's (1989) Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB) was the second instrument used in this study and as a measure deployed as an outcome variable in WBT-SP studies (Fava, 2016). The PWB scale is a self-rating instrument used to measure the six areas of psychological well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 2014). Additionally, the mean scores are used to calculate a total measure for psychological well-being (Ruini et al., 2009). The PWB scale comes in a 42, 30, 18, and 3 item version, and has been translated into more than 30 different countries (Ryff, 2014). The current study utilized the 18-item version of the PWB scale, with scores ranging from 18-126. Higher scores of the PWB scale indicate a greater PWB. In a study of participants aged between 18-24 years old, the Cronbach's alpha was .87 for total well-being and ranged from .51 to .78 for the individual dimensions (Tay, 2023). Both the PSS and PWB questionnaires used within the current study included items with a Likert scale response format. The PSS and the PWB have been widely used with adolescents in the US and internationally.

Research Design

A quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest wait-list control design (Balderson et al., 2016) was used to compare the influence of the WBT-SP on two groups (classes) of high school students (see Figure 1). The dependent variables were student self-ratings on the perceived stress and psychological well-being measures. The independent variables were a school counselor-led

intervention using the WBT-SP, the wait-list control group, and time (repeated measures). The wait-list control group received the treatment after the intervention group.
In order to account for differences between the intervention group and the wait-list control group at the pre- and post-intervention points of the study, a *t*-test was used to reveal if there were statistically significant differences in perceived stress (measured by the PSS) and psychological well-being (measured by the PWB scales) between both intervention groups. Two independent samples *t*-test were conducted to evaluate if there were statistically significant differences of psychological well-being and perceived stress between the intervention and wait list control group.

A two-way mixed factorial ANOVA was used to analyze if the WBT-SP had an effect on overall psychological well-being (PWB) over time, and if exposure to the WBT-SP generated a stress reducing effect over time. Finally, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was used to examine if exposure to the WBT-SP generated a reduction of perceived stress for the female students. The .05 level of significance was chosen for this study.

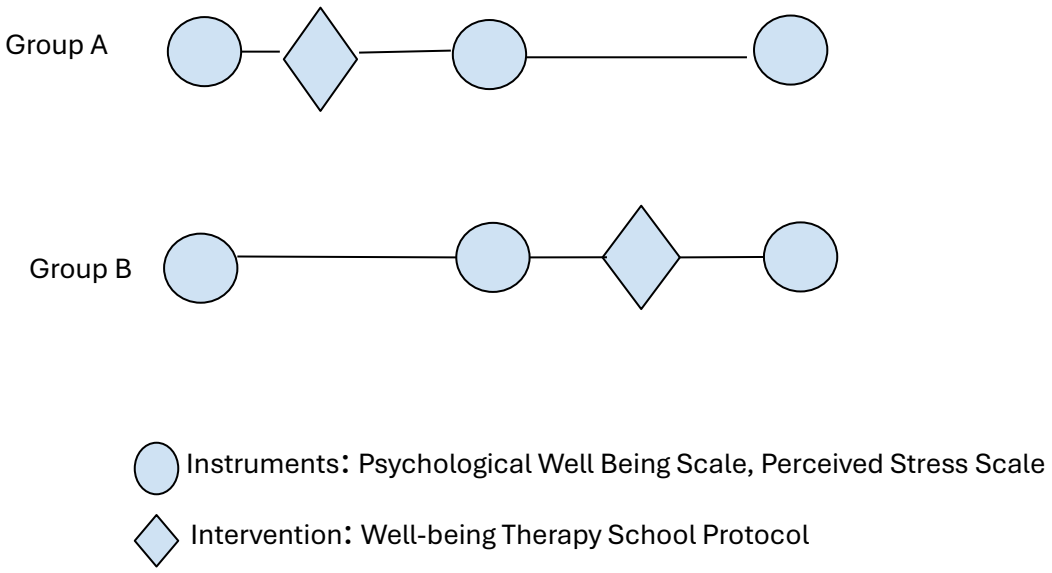

Figure 1. Quasi-experimental wait-list control design

Procedure
The six session topics were: recognizing and expressing different emotions, a focus on the relationship between thoughts and emotions, identifying negative and helpful thoughts, positive relations and self-acceptance, autonomy and purpose in life, and happiness and emotional well-being (Ruini et al., 2009). The WBT-SP provides session topics with some activities, placing an emphasis that activities should be tailored to fit the population. Therefore,

the school counselor created full lessons and shared them with the student's classroom teacher ahead of time. The classroom teacher served as a co-facilitator during the sessions. The groups met for 30-45 minutes, three times a week for two and a half weeks. The classes were on a block schedule and, therefore, met every other day. The intervention group met for the 1st round of sessions, and the wait-list control group met for the 2nd round of sessions.

It is important to note that each session was led from a trauma-informed lens. During the classroom discussions, students often shared firsthand experiences in their home lives and neighborhoods. The experiences included death of loved ones by violence and accidents, incarceration of loved ones, estranged family members, difficult relationships, mental health issues, and housing insecurity.

Post–Intervention

Upon completion of the program, all students, including the wait-list control group, took the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) and Ryff's (1989) Psychological Well-being Scale again. The baseline scores were compared to the post intervention scores.

Ethics and Fidelity

Several items are addressed in this section to promote ethical behavior and fidelity. The first topic considers the multiple roles of the researcher, who is also the school counselor employed at the school. This duality can create perceptions of a power imbalance with students. In addition, the researcher directly benefited academically from the implementation of this study. To reduce perceptions of a power imbalance, it was reiterated to students that they do not have to participate and there was no penalty for quitting.

Three components of intervention fidelity were used to limit internal and external threats to fidelity (Gearing et al., 2011). First, the intervention was designed from an established model with desired goals. The activities to achieve the goals, ASCA Mindsets and Behavior standards, as well as state learning standards were included in the lesson plan. The balance between implementation fidelity and the adaptation to school needs and resources were taken into consideration (Leadbeater et al., 2018). The original study held six, two-hour sessions once a week (Ruini et al., 2009). Due to the transient nature of the student population studied, testing schedules, and curriculum aligned test prep, the planned intervention met twice a week over three weeks for 30-45 minutes. The second component of implementation fidelity, monitoring intervention delivery, ensured the objectives of the WBT-SP were executed effectively. To ensure the objectives were taught, an intervention checklist was used, and student attendance was recorded after each lesson. The final component was treatment receipt, defined as the participants understanding and using the new skills during the lesson (Gearing et al., 2009). Pre- and post-tests were useful measures to check for intervention effectiveness.

Lastly, to protect confidentiality, identifying information was not shared with anyone other than the research team. Hard copies of the surveys were kept private in a locked file cabinet and files were kept on a password protected flash drive.

Results

Changes in overall psychological wellbeing, the dimensions of psychological wellbeing, and perceived stress were examined from each individual group, the groups combined, and by gender over time. Neither group had significant changes when they were analyzed individually, apart from female students and perceived stress. Therefore, the results are from the combined groups over time. The goal of the first research question was to determine if the WBT-SP resulted in an overall increase in psychological well-being. A two-way mixed factorial ANOVA explained the effect of the WBT-SP on overall psychological wellbeing (PWB) over time for both classes. There was a significant main effect for time on overall PWB scores, F (2, 38) = 4.59, p =. 016, η^2 = .05. A post hoc test using the Bonferroni correction showed a significant difference occurred between Time 1 and Time 3, p = .05. In summary, exposure to the WBT-SP overtime seemed to have a significant effect on the student's total PWB.

The purpose of the second research question was to determine which aspects of Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being would increase as a result of the WBT-SP. The most salient findings regarding the dimensions of psychological well-being are environmental mastery and personal growth. The remaining dimensions did not yield significant results. Regarding environmental mastery, Mauchly's test suggested there was not a violation of sphericity assumption, x^2 (2) = .75, p = .079. The results showed a significant main effect for time on environmental mastery scores, F (2, 38) = 5.63, p = .007, η^2 = .04. The Bonferroni corrected post hoc test revealed that environmental mastery significantly changed between Time 1 and Time 2 (p = .03) and between Time 1 and Time 3 (p = .008). Overall, environmental mastery scores increased for the combined group.

Data from the personal growth dimension produced a nonsignificant sphericity value, x^2 (2) = .94, p > .05, p = .595). ANOVA results suggested a significant change in respondents' personal growth scores over time, F (2, 38) = 3.30, p < .05, p = .048), η^2 = .04. The Bonferroni corrected post hoc test showed a significant mean difference between Time 1 and Time 3 (p = .025).

In summary, there were overall significant increases in student's overall psychological wellbeing, in addition to the specific PWB dimensions of environmental mastery and personal growth. In other words, when the intervention and wait-list control group were compared to one another there were no significant differences, nor when each group's scores were compared at the different time points. However, when the group's scores were combined for each time point, environmental mastery and personal growth yielded significant increases over

time. Figure 2 below displays the mean scores for each PWB dimension for the combined groups over each time point.

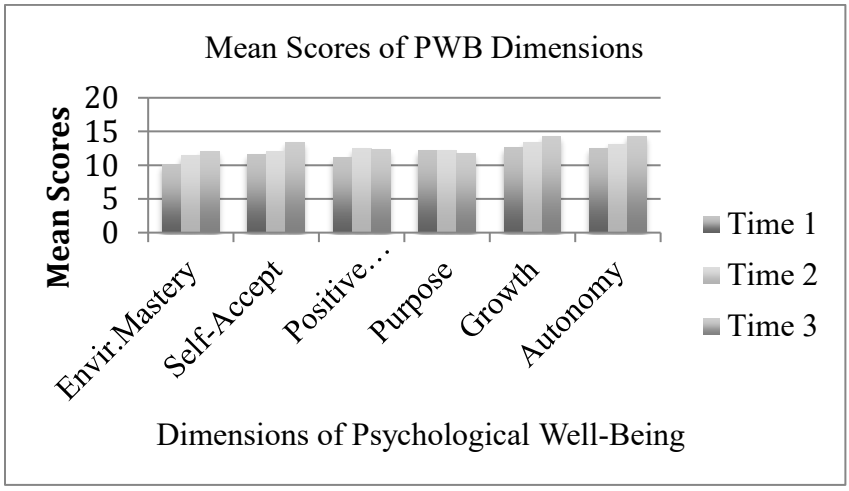

Figure 2. Mean scores of PWB dimension over time.

The last research question sought to determine if exposure to the WBT-SP would reduce perceived stress scores. A two-way mixed factorial ANOVA was used to analyze if exposure to the WBT-SP generated a stress reducing effect over time. Students were evaluated as a combined group and separately (intervention and wait-list control) on the PSS measure at time 1, time 2, and time 3. There were no significant differences in stress scores between the groups (F (1, 19) = .01, p = .909) or when combined *(*F (1.41, 26.75) = 1.61, p = .219). However, immediately after the intervention, both groups reported a decline in perceived stress levels. In addition to overall perceived stress scores, changes by gender were also of interest. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was used to examine the PSS scores of male and female students. Statistical significance was not reached with the male students although there was a steady decline in PSS scores. However, the female students PSS scores were significantly reduced. There was not a violation of sphericity assumption, x^2 (2) = .49, p = .08. The results indicate a significant change in PSS occurred, F (2,16) = 3.64, p = .05, η^2 =. 06. Although the Bonferroni post hoc test did not show specifically where the changes occurred, the largest mean difference occurred between time 1 and 3 (M = -4.89).

Discussion

This study examined whether a school counselor-led classroom intervention, using the WBT-SP could help reduce perceived stress and enhance psychological well-being among students in a high-needs secondary school with a predominantly Black student body. There was a significant increase of overall psychological well-being, in addition to the specific dimensions, environmental mastery and personal growth. Baseline perceived stress scores of this sample were higher than the average. At the conclusion of this study perceived stress scores decreased overall, but significantly for female students.

There is limited research on the effects of positive psychology interventions to reduce perceived stress and increase psychological well-being with a sample similar to the current study. In addition, there are few research studies that used the Well Being Therapy school intervention (Fava, 2016). The current study supports multi-component positive psychology intervention research, such as the WBT-SP, that utilized Ryff's PWB scales and/or perceived stress as outcome measures. Due to the limited number of studies that met these criteria, studies conducted with a range of nationalities, ethnicities, and age groups are compared to the current study.

There are three known studies that utilized the WBT-SP with adolescent students (Ruini et al., 2006; Ruini et al., 2009; Tomba et al., 2010), and of which supported the results of the current study. As mentioned earlier, the current study took place in a high school setting with a predominantly Black student population in the United States. In contrast, the studies that used the WBT-SP, all took place in Italy. The duration of prior WBT-SP studies were longer than the current study, ranging from 2 hours, every other week, for a total of 4 sessions (Runi et al., 2006) to 6 sessions over 6 weeks (Ruini et al., 2009; Tomba et al., 2010). The current study met for a shorter amount of time, 6 sessions lasting 30-45 minutes, over 3 weeks. Additionally, while the mean age of participants in the current study was 17.47, previous WBT-SP were conducted with younger students with mean ages of 13.04; 14.47; and 11.41 respectively (Ruini et al., 2006; Ruini et al.,2009; Tomba et al., 2010).

Overall PWB

Even though ethnicity, duration, and age of the current study differed, the results were in line with previous positive psychology interventions. The results of two WBT-SP intervention studies (Ruini et al., 2006; Ruini et al., 2009), supported the current study with significant improvements in overall PWB. In a study using a different positive psychology intervention led by Gigantesco et al., (2015), Italian students with a mean age of 15.2 participated in an emotional intelligence and 6 step problem solving program for 20 hours. The program was developed specifically for secondary schools to improve psychological well-being, self-efficacy, and satisfaction with life (Gigantesco et al., 2015). Similar to the current study, a significant improvement in overall PWB transpired with the high school sample (Gigantesco et al., 2015).

PWB Dimensions

Complementary to results of other research, the current study indicated significant improvements in the PWB dimensions, Personal Growth and Environmental Mastery. For example, an original WBT-SP intervention that took place in a high school setting, which was identified as being more at risk for mood disorders, resulted in significant improvements in Personal Growth (Fava, 2016; Ruini et al., 2009). Furthermore, in another PPI study with upper secondary students in Finland, students completed a 38-hour curriculum, with Personal Growth

emerging as the primary identified theme (Hongell-Ekholm et al., 2024). Lastly, in the Gigantesco et al., (2015) study mentioned above, a significant difference in environmental mastery occurred, further supporting the current study. The results of the comparable studies mentioned had significant improvements in additional PWB dimensions such as self-acceptance and autonomy (Gigantesco et al., 2015; Ruini et al., 2006; Tomba et al., 2010).

Stress

According to researchers Tejado-Gallardo et al., (2020) there are a lack of studies that analyzes the effects of PPIs on stress and with adolescents. Prior studies have focused on the reduction of distress and improvement of well-being with adults (Tejado-Gallardo et al., 2020). Similarly, the reduction of distress was a partial focus of the original studies using the WBT-SP (Ruini et al., 2006; Ruini et al., 2009; Tomba et al., 2010). Although not significant, the current study found a reduction in overall perceived stress scores. Due to the variation of baseline perceived stress scores, gender differences were examined. According to Cohen (1994), the female norm score for perceived stress is M = 13.7, which means the female sample in the current study experienced more than twice the perceived stress levels than the norm, M=28. Although adolescent males and females are exposed to the same amount of stressful life events, specific stressful life events differ by gender (Lavoie et al., 2019). The findings of the current study are consistent with other studies that reported females experienced higher levels of stress than males (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012; Ruini et al., 2009; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). In the WBT-SP intervention that took place in a high school, most students were female and had high baseline scores of distress (Ruini et al., 2009). After completing the WBT-SP school intervention, there was a significant decline in distress and anxiety (Ruini et al., 2009). The results of the Tomba et al. (2010) study is also germane to the current study. Researchers compared outcome results from a WBT and Anger Management group (Tomba et al., 2010). When the groups were combined, there was a significant difference in the Kellner's Symptom Questionnaire (SQ), Somatization, for female students (p=.02). Like the current study, there was a significant decrease in perceived stress for female students. Collectively, results from previous studies suggest interventions aimed at improving overall psychological well-being, environmental mastery, and personal growth, as well as reducing perceived stress could be successful.

Implications

School Counseling Research

School counselors have an inside connection to gain approvals and provide action-research within their districts. This access provides school counselors with an advantage to implement and evaluate effective evidence-based interventions, applicable to their student populations. The findings from studies can inform the practice of other school counselors as well as influence school policy. Understanding the outcomes of this study, school counselors are encouraged to research different positive psychology interventions that may be applicable with different student groups. It could also be useful to replicate this study and track the long-term outcomes

of the participants. For instance, it would be informative to examine how long perceived stress remained at a reduced level for the female students, and the continued growth of overall well-being for the entire sample. Additionally, it would be insightful to further investigate if the two significantly improved dimensions of psychological well-being were maintained over time. Specifically, it would be valuable to explore if students maintained their ability to effectively manage their life (environmental mastery) and continued to grow and development (personal growth) during their post-secondary stage of life.

School Counseling Practice

Given the outcomes of the current study, school counselor practitioners could enhance student mental health outcomes by tending to them through large groups, small gender-based groups, psychoeducation, faculty collaboration, and utilizing assessments measuring stress and well-being. Large group classroom lessons with upper secondary students remain essential to reach as many students as possible. Avoiding classroom lessons to enhance well-being could be considered neglectful, especially with a population that may have limited mental health access. Gender differences suggest male stressors may relate to issues with authority or school performance, while females have a greater exposure to relational stressors from peers, parents, or someone of romantic interest (Lavoie et al., 2019). In a recent study by Mayes et al., (2021), Black, female participants expressed feeling invisible and yearned for school counselors to help with problems in general, not solely academic, to help manage stress. An unawareness of relational stressors females endure is common due to internalizing emotions more than males, in turn causing their stress levels to go unnoticed (Lavoie et al., 2019; Panjwani et al., 2019). Therefore, small gender-based groups could provide a space for extra support with students who have similar experiences.

School counselors in collaboration with other support service staff (school psychologist, nurse, social worker) should work together to promote positive mental health of students. Utilizing assessments such as the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, et al., (1983) and Ryff's (1989) PWB Scale can be useful to make data-informed programming decisions. In addition, gathering information on the source of perceived stressors would be beneficial. Through collaboration, awareness of the stress levels of enrolled students and the long-term effects of chronic stress should be presented to school boards, faculty, students, and families. In addition, advocating for increased mental health community resources, as well as highlighting the benefit of evidenced-based interventions such as the WBT-SP should be shared.

Counselor Education

The findings of the current study underscore the importance of multicultural and social justice curricula in graduate school counseling programs. An emphasis on mental health access, utilizing culturally relevant, evidence-based interventions, and recognizing gender-related stressors is recommended. Unique stressors associated with race and lower socio-economic

households, as well as the inequities in mental health access, would be beneficial in the school counseling curriculum. Additionally, including gender-related stress among adolescents within counselor education programs would deepen graduate students' understanding of a key factor in promoting student well-being. To effectively prepare school counselors to serve high-needs populations, the importance of evidence-based interventions, such as the WBT-SP, should be taught. Furthermore, graduate students should be trained and deliver large group classroom lessons with upper secondary students, with the goal of promoting psychological well-being. Lastly, counselor educators are encouraged to integrate supervision practices designed to help interns recognize and respond to stressors affecting children and adolescents.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of research conducted in schools and with human subjects. First, the sample size and attendance were major issues with this population. The school was described as having a problem with chronic attendance by the state department. Over half of the original sample did not complete all the assessments due to being absent. Furthermore, many students were not on track to graduate and were pulled out of class to participate in various remediation programs. Therefore, attendance may have impacted the results, due to smaller sample sizes than expected. Furthermore, the findings are from one high-needs secondary school and therefore are not generalizable to the larger population.

The second limitation is the condensed duration of the intervention. The current study was completed over 3 weeks, with lessons lasting 30-45 minutes. Prior studies using the WBT-SP were conducted internationally, and some met for 2-hour time periods. As positive psychology programs spread around the world it is important to recognize cross-cultural adaptations are necessary (Shankland & Rosset, 2017). Reducing the length of the lessons was a cultural adaptation needed for this school and other schools in the United States. However, the reduction in the delivery times from the original WBT-SP studies (Ruini et al., 2006; Ruini et al., 2009), may have affected the optimal benefit to students. In the original studies, self-acceptance, personal growth, and overall PWB improved whereby in the current study environmental mastery, personal growth, and overall PWB improved.

Furthermore, the students knew the assessment results were being used for their school counselor's research, running the possibility of response bias. Serving dual roles as the school counselor and researcher may have been a limitation. The school counselor in this study shared a similar background to the students. In a study by Rodgers and Furcron (2019) that investigated multicultural competence of school counselors in an urban school district, they found that Black school counselors rated themselves higher regarding meeting the socio-emotional needs of diverse students, more than their Caucasian peers. Therefore, receiving the

classroom lessons from their school counselor may have been an asset, taking less time to build trust between the students.

With a sample that has chronic attendance issues and multiple areas of stress, there were significant findings that indicate the WBT-SP is a beneficial program. However, the findings of this study are preliminary in nature and should be replicated in future research. It is recommended that this study is replicated with other secondary, high-needs school populations within the United States, using larger sample sizes.

Conclusion

Professional school counselors are key contributors to the promotion of positive mental health within schools. This role is ever more important in upper-secondary, high-needs schools with large Black student populations. Through culturally affirming practices, school counselors can implement interventions tailored to honor the experiences and cultural assets of racially and economically disenfranchised youth. This research provides hope that by targeting the improvement of psychological well-being, the trajectory and implications of chronic stress can be interrupted, resilience can be fostered, and a more equitable and fulfilling life can be reached by all students.

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School Counselor and Principal Relationship as a Predictor of ASCA National Model Implementation

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Abstract

This research investigated the relationship between elementary school counselors and principals as a predictor of ASCA National Model implementation, employing a quantitative, non-experimental survey design. Data was collected through the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating and the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey, revealing a significant predictive association between their relationship and the extent of school counselors' implementation of the ASCA National Model. Notably, the *mission and vision* subscale of the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating emerged as the only standalone predictor of program implementation. Using the Ecological School Counseling Theory as a framework, this research underscores the importance of building a strong school ecosystem through collaborative efforts and mutual goals between school counselors and principals, contributing evidence to support school counselor and principal relationships and implementation of the ASCA National Model. The results prompt further discussion on the implications for research, practice, and policy aimed at fostering healthy school ecosystems to improve life-readiness and academic success for students. The findings from this research serve as a valuable resource for school counselors, principals, and training programs, enabling them to better equip schools to serve each and every student.

Introduction

Created in 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model emphasizes the positive outcomes of comprehensive school counseling programs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). Now in its fourth edition, the model continues to serve as the cornerstone for many school counseling programs nationwide. While the profession of school counseling has continued to evolve, so has the ASCA National Model to assist school counselors in developing academic, college and career, and social/emotional skills for all students (ASCA, 2019).

The ASCA National Model recognizes that collaborative relationships between educational partners improve student success. The Ecological School Counseling (ESC) theory emphasizes that many factors impact student success, and educators uniquely address those ecosystems (Hilts et al., 2022). School counselors and principals can impact each system, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (McMahon & Mason, 2019).

As an underpinning for the research, the ESC theory recognizes that school counselors and principals have the opportunity to collaborate to build healthy school systems that prioritize mutual understanding and goals, where everyone contributes (McMahon & Mason, 2019). This ecosystem approach recognizes that educational partners cannot individually be solely responsible for change but that multilevel interventions can initiate and cause change to occur, resulting in healthier systems for all (McMahon & Mason, 2019). Ideally, the school counselor and the principal work collaboratively to create an equitable school environment that includes a comprehensive school counseling program that addresses systemic disparities in order to best serve all students.

Research supports implementation of the ASCA National Model and the positive impact of an effective school counselor and principal relationship (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017; Fye et al., 2017; Randick et al., 2018). However, it was unknown if there was a predictive relationship between the school counselor and principal relationship and the extent of a school counselor's implementation of the ASCA National Model. This research study utilized a quantitative, non-experimental survey design to examine whether the relationship between elementary school counselors and principals predicts elementary school counselors' implementation of the ASCA National Model. Adding knowledge to this research question aimed to provide information for school counselors, principals, and training programs to better prepare these partners for effective collaborative relationships and implementation of the ASCA National Model.

Literature Review

ASCA National Model

School counselors create comprehensive school counseling programs defined by the ASCA National Model to improve life-readiness and academic success for each and every student (ASCA, 2019). Program implementation can impact the school environment by strengthening the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Williams, 2016). School counselors can address students' microlevel challenges by working directly with students, families, and school staff to benefit students' skills and outcomes in academic achievement, social/emotional development, and college and career readiness (ASCA, 2019). Addressing academic outcomes, research has found that school counselors are effective in closing achievement and opportunity gaps (Leon et al., 2011), decreasing racial disparities in Advanced Placement (AP) course enrollment (Davis et al., 2013), increasing crucial skills needed for long-term academic success such as organization, time management, and motivation (Berger, 2013), addressing educational disparities (Gay & Swank, 2021), and improving student attendance which can be a contributing factor to academic success (Akos et al., 2019).

School counseling program implementation benefits students' social/emotional development at the microlevel by working with the educational team to create an accountable, safe, and nurturing environment (ASCA, 2019). Midgett and colleagues (2018) found that comprehensive

school counseling programs can increase knowledge and confidence in students' ability to report and stop bullying incidents. Additionally, Steen and colleagues (2018) found that implementing small groups as part of a comprehensive school counseling program increased confidence and empowerment (Steen et al., 2018). Further, school counselors strengthen the microsystem with the implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs that can positively impact the overall school environment (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018a).

Finally, comprehensive school counseling programs can influence college and career development. Lapan et al. (2019) found that high school students with access to a fully implemented comprehensive school counseling program aligned with the ASCA National Model can make better informed college decisions because they have more access to college counseling opportunities. Students who meet with a school counselor to discuss postsecondary options are three times more likely to attend college and seven times more likely to apply for financial aid (Velez, 2016). Similarly, Jones et al. (2019) confirmed that a comprehensive school counseling program that received the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) distinction resulted in higher student SAT and ACT WorkKeys scores as well as increased college enrollment.

In addition to directly supporting students' academic, social/emotional, and college and career development, the ASCA National Model emphasizes that school counselors utilize advocacy to strengthen the mesosystem by advocating for the formation of interactive relationships between educational partners (Williams, 2016). School counselors also utilize collaboration to bolster the exosystem by encouraging partnerships among social services, community agencies, and other resources not typically available within schools (Williams, 2016). Research has found that school counselors and principals are increasingly understanding and supporting families and communities through macro-level work (Boyland et al., 2019; Trombly et al., 2022). Systemic change can eliminate barriers at the macrosystem and chronosystem levels (Williams, 2016). Together, school counselors and principals can intertwine the themes of comprehensive school counseling programs as defined by the ASCA National Model with ESC theory to ensure equitable educational services for each and every student.

The role of the school counselor has continued to evolve from a once reactive position that served some students to a preventative, proactive role that benefits all students through the creation of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). While the ASCA National Model has added a structured framework and provided a clearer definition of the school counselor's role, earning recognition among professionals as a best practice in school counseling, research frequently identifies the lack of principal support as a significant barrier to its effective implementation (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017; Fye et al., 2017; Hilts et al., 2019; Randick et al., 2018). The relationship between the school counselor and principal has been cited as the most influential factor in ASCA National Model implementation (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016).

School Counselor and Principal Relationships

The school counselor and principal relationship can result in benefits at multiple levels of the school ecosystem (Dahir & Geesa, 2022). At the individual level for school counselors, collaborative support from the principal could be a protective factor from work-related stress that can lead to burnout for school counselors (Fye et al., 2020a). Furthermore, positive school counselor and principal relationships can result in higher job satisfaction (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016) and improved job performance (Randick et al., 2018). Students also experience benefits at the individual level, including increased student achievement when collaborative efforts occur (Yavuz et al., 2017). In addition to improving academic achievement, partnerships can create more inclusive learning conditions for all students (Beasley & Ieva, 2022; Wikoff & Wood, 2022). Wikoff and Wood (2022) found that the perception of a collaborative relationship between school counselors and principals improved student advocacy efforts for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning or queer students. Additionally, Beasley and Ieva (2022) emphasized the importance of school counselors and principals to dismantle racist practices and work toward systemic change to create a more equitable environment.

Further, at the microsystem level, Mullen and Gutierrez (2016) noted that when school counselors had a positive relationship with the principal, there was an increase in the direct services provided to students, which can positively impact the school. Similarly, Waalkes et al. (2018) added that when school counselors can provide school-wide preventative instruction and can consistently consult, the school counselor and principal relationship improves. Rock et al. (2017) pointed out that a collaborative environment improves the school microsystem's overall climate. Lawrence and Stone (2019) acknowledged that while principals have a pulse on the entire school, school counselors have a pulse on every student. School counselors and principals have a unique opportunity to collaborate to serve the school (Howell et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders also call on principals to collaborate to meet student needs (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The mesosystem benefits from the school counselor and principal relationship when the school ecosystem creates a school-family-community partnership (Bryan et al., 2017). For instance, following the COVID-19 pandemic, research recommends that schools create leadership teams that include the principal, the school counselor, and other family and community partners so that the school mesosystem can strengthen specifically in the face of a traumatic event or emergency (Kruczek et al., 2022). At the exosystem, Lowery et al. (2019) suggested that working relationships between the school counselor and principal can eliminate systemic inequalities and increase social justice in schools. School counselors and principals are called to not only collaborate on behalf of students but also to do so through social justice leadership that can

lead to school improvement and possible reform (Lowery et al., 2019). The benefits of effective relationships stretch through each layer of the school ecosystem.

Despite significant benefits to school counselor and principal relationships, there can be barriers to successful relationships. Historically, research cited differing views of the school counselor's role and how school counselors spend their time as a significant barrier (Chandler et al., 2018). ASCA published a research report that surveyed over 1,600 school and district administrators, finding that many school counselors are assigned non-school counseling duties, such as managing students' Section 504 plans or coordinating testing programs (ASCA, 2023). ASCA (2023) stated, "Such duties detract from their essential responsibility to ensure all students succeed" (p. 12).

Additionally, a mixed-methods study with over 500 school counselors and principals found disparities in perceptions of school counselors' competencies and priorities for serving students, which further complicated effective collaboration (Hannor-Walker et al., 2022). Research has indicated that inappropriate and administrative tasks are particularly prevalent in rural schools (Odegard-Koester & Watkins, 2016). The assignment of inappropriate tasks not only results in school counselors being unable to implement comprehensive school counseling programs but can also lead to dissatisfaction and burnout (Fye et al., 2020a; Fye, et al., 2022). However, Lewis and colleagues (2022) found that principals can correctly identify appropriate school counseling tasks. While the principal participants in this study appeared to have a strong understanding of the role of the school counselor, other studies have found different results, and researchers continue to cite role confusion as a barrier to the implementation of the ASCA National Model (Lowery et al., 2018). It is also of note that the principal perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate roles and what principals actually expect school counselors to do in the school may differ (Lewis et al., 2022).

While principals' understanding of the role of the school counselor has continued to be a barrier for some school counselors, research has indicated that policy, mandates, and legislation surrounding the role of the school counselor can increase principals' knowledge of comprehensive school counseling programs (Cinotti et al., 2022). The outcome of research by Cinotti and colleagues (2022) indicated that policies such as mandated comprehensive school counseling programs effectively increased knowledge and effective collaboration between school counselors and principals in New York. The state researched in this study did not have policies similar to the New York state mandate surrounding the delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program.

Another barrier to school counselor and principal relationships is finding time to meet (Duslak & Geier, 2016). Effective relationships are a process that takes time, and ideally, this process is well-planned out utilizing a framework for productive partnerships (Jordan, 2022). Although

principals and school counselors have many responsibilities that make finding time to meet challenging, Duslak and Geier (2016) emphasized that meeting together frequently must be addressed. Kruczek et al. (2022) found that both school counselors and principals desired more collaborative time together, specifically following disruptions to the educational system, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, they did not prioritize finding time to do so (Kruczek et al., 2022). While school counselors are three times more likely than principals to desire more collaborative time together, both parties identify collaboration as a beneficial tool that is too often disregarded due to time restraints (Duslak & Geier, 2016; Kruczek et al., 2022). Informal interactions, such as those during arrival, lunch, hallway passes, or breaks in the day, can provide valuable opportunities for connection when structured meeting times are not available (Lowery et al., 2019). Together, school counselors and principals can address barriers to effective school counselor and principal relationships and work towards building effective relationships that benefit all.

This study adds to the knowledge and identifies the need for additional research to address both the ASCA National Model implementation and school counselor and principal relationships. Research has consistently shown that the ASCA National Model is effective (Lapan et al., 2019; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016), and some studies have shown what factors impact effective school counselor and principal relationships (Duslak & Geier, 2016; Waalkes et al., 2018). How these elements predict each other was still relatively unknown. The synthesis of the research findings resulted in a need for new research on whether the perceived strength of the school counselor and principal relationships predicts ASCA National Model implementation. This study aimed to examine whether elementary school counselor and principal collaborative relationships predict the implementation of the ASCA National Model using the following research questions:

1. Does the school counselor and principal relationship as measured by the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021), serve as a predictor of ASCA National Model implementation as measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010)?
2. Which Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021) subscales (collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust) predict the implementation of the ASCA National Model as measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010)?

Positionality Statement

Maintaining a reflexive stance in quantitative and qualitative research has been regarded as a way to help readers understand who the researchers are and what they bring to the study as unique individuals (Jamieson et al., 2023). This consideration is made to account for bias and viewpoints that we may have as a part of our background and identities. The authors of this study share a collective commitment to advancing the school counseling profession. The lead

author has served as a school counselor and state-level leader, with national-level involvement, including serving on the ASCA Board of Directors and being an ASCA-Certified Trainer. Their area of expertise includes presenting training to principals across the county regarding the ASCA National Model. The second author is a counselor educator and supervisor with experience directing practicum and internship, preparing future school counselors to implement evidence-based practices rooted in the ASCA National Model. The third author's background includes professional service as a school counselor and as President of a state School Counselor Association, where their leadership emphasized policy advocacy and legislative engagement to support comprehensive school counseling programs. Collectively, our experiences inform our research lens and our commitment to strengthening school counselor and principal relationships as a foundation for effective ASCA National Model implementation.

Method

Participants

A list of all school counselors and principals was obtained from a Department of Education in a west south central state and all potential participants were emailed about the research study, resulting in 163 total participants. There were 108 school counselor participants, with a response rate of 12%. Fifty-five assistant and head principals participated in the research study, with a response rate of 4%. The demographic information specific to the sample is included in Table 1, describing the characteristics, including age, gender, and race/ethnicity of the sample. Table 2 provides descriptive information about the participants, including type of educator, years of experience, and certificate type.

Table 1

Demographics of Sample

Characteristic	Category	*n*	Percentage
Age	25-34	19	12%
	35-44	57	35%
	45-54	57	35%
	55-64	25	15%
	65 or over	4	2%
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.6%
Gender	Female	142	87%

	Male	19	12%
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.6%
	Other	1	0.6%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian or Alaskan Native	8	5%
	Asian or Pacific Islander	3	2%
	Black or African American	4	2%
	Hispanic	3	2%
	Multiple Ethnicities	4	2%
	White or Caucasian	140	86%
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.6%

Note: Total participants *N* = 163

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Sample

Characteristic	Category	*n*	Percentage
Type of Educator	School Counselor	108	66%
	Principal	55	34%
Years of Experience	Less than 3 years	30	18%
	3-9 years	73	45%
	10-20 years	52	32%
	More than 20 years	8	5%
Certification Type	Alternative Administrator Certification	6	4%
	Traditional Administrator Certification	49	30%

Alternative School Counselor Certification	29	18%
Traditional School Counselor Certification	79	48%

Note: Total participants *N* = 163

Procedures

This IRB-approved study utilized a non-experimental, quantitative survey design to address school counselor and principal relationships and the level of implementation of the ASCA National Model to determine if the variables predicted one another. Participants completed three surveys: a demographic survey, the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021), and the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010). The study utilized linear regression with the survey responses to determine if the variables predicted one another.

All potential participants gained access to the study through a SurveyMonkey link. The participants were shown the informed consent document, which included an acknowledgment that participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, that participants were provided with clear and accurate information concerning the study, and that participants understood the information and had opportunities to ask questions. Following informed consent, the school counselor or principal responded to a series of questions to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. If the participants qualified, they were then directed to the next page to provide demographic information.

Following the demographic survey, the participants were directed to the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021) and the School Counselor Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010) to complete both surveys. It was expected that the surveys would take approximately 25 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the surveys, the participants were directed to a screen that thanked them for their time and then exited the survey. All survey data was stored on Survey Monkey, a password-protected online survey platform, until it was uploaded into JASP for data analysis (JASP Team, 2023).

Instrumentation

School counselor and principal perceptions of their relationship as defined by collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust were measured using the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021). This survey is an updated version of the original “Principal-Counselor Relationship Survey” (College Board, 2011). The original survey and the updated version were created in collaboration with the College Board, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American School Counselor Association to uncover what school counselors and principals report as the most critical aspects of an effective collaborative relationship (Finkelstein, 2009; Roffers, 2021). After the creation of the original

survey, the College Board surveyed 2,386 school counselors and principals using the instrument and used the results to create the *Enhancing the Principal-School Counselor Relationship Toolkit* (College Board, 2011). The survey has a Cronbach's Alpha of .868 (Roffers, 2021). Permission was obtained from the College Board, Dr. Doreen Finkelstein, original author and Research Scientist, and Dr. Alison Roffers, the author of the updated survey, to utilize this instrument.

The level of implementation of the ASCA National Model was measured using the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (SCPIS) instrument (Clemens et al., 2010). This instrument is widely used and considered the most commonly utilized tool for researchers to measure implementation of the ASCA National Model (Clemens et al., 2010; Olsen et al., 2021). The SCPIS is a three-factor model with 17 questions. The programmatic orientation factor, had a Cronbach's alpha of .79, school counseling services factor had a Cronbach's alpha of .81, and school counselors' use of computer software factor had a Cronbach's alpha of .83. A decade later, Fye and colleagues (2020b) utilized the SCPIS which resulted in an internal consistency reliability of .91. While the survey has relatively high internal consistency, aspects of reliability beyond that have not been evaluated (Clemens et al., 2010). Limited test-retest reliability has been established for the SCPIS (Fye et al., 2020b). For this study, permission was obtained, but researchers can use the SCPIS without obtaining specific permission (Clemens et al., 2010).

Data Analysis

For this study, the first research question utilized simple linear regression. The question explored if the strength of the school counselor and principal relationship predicts the level of implementation of the ASCA National Model. The dependent variable was the ASCA National Model's implementation level measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010). The predictor-independent variable was the strength of the relationship measured by the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021).

The second research question utilized multiple regression because it included multiple independent variables. The second research question asked which Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating subscales (collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust) predict the implementation of the ASCA National Model. Again, the dependent variable was the level of implementation of the ASCA National Model measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010). The predictor-independent variables were the subscales (collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust) of the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021).

Results

Research Question 1

Does the school counselor and principal relationship as measured by the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021), serve as a predictor of ASCA National Model

implementation as measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010)? In the first research question, JASP was utilized to run the simple linear regression with the school counselor and principal relationship as the independent variable and ASCA National Model implementation as the dependent variable. The results indicated that the school counselor and principal relationship is a significant predictor of school counseling program implementation, $F(1, 161) = 60.472$, $p < .001$. The level of implementation increased by .994 as each point of relationship rating increased. Table 3 presents the linear regression results for research question one.

Table 3

Regression Results for the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating

Model		***B***	***SE***	***β***	***t***	***p***
H_o	(Intercept)	47.515	0.866		54.868	< .001
H_1	(Intercept)	22.865	3.255		7.024	< .001
	Total Score for the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating	0.994	0.128	0.523	7.776***	< .001

Note. Overall Model: $F(1, 161) = 60.472$, $p < .001$. $R^2 = .273$. Adjusted $R^2 = .269$.
***p < .001.

Research Question 2

Which Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021) subscales (collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust) predict the implementation of the ASCA National Model as measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010)? JASP was used to run a multiple regression for research question two to examine how the independent variables predict the dependent variable. The independent variables were the subscales of the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating: collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust (Roffers, 2021), and the dependent variable was ASCA National Model implementation. The *mission and vision* subscale was the only significant predictor of school counseling program implementation, $F(6, 156) = 10.912$, $p < .001$, adj. $R^2 = 0.296$. Table 4 presents the multiple linear regression results for research question two.

Table 4

Regression Results for the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating Subscales

Model	Variable	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	*p*
H_o	(Intercept)	47.515	0.866		54.868	< .001
H_1	(Intercept)	23.569	3.428		6.874	< .001
	Collaboration	1.959	1.202	0.201	1.629	0.105
	Communication	-1.369	1.413	-0.138	-0.969	0.334
	Mission and Vision	2.622	1.159	0.257	2.263*	0.025
	Respect	-0.153	1.731	-0.014	-0.088	0.930
	Responsibility	0.137	1.187	0.013	0.116	0.908
	Trust	2.728	1.719	0.278	1.587	0.114

Note. Overall Model: F (6, 156) = 10.912, p < .001. R^2 = .269. Adjusted R^2 = .296.
*p < .05.

Discussion

This study investigated how the relationship between elementary school counselors and principals serves as a predictor of ASCA National Model implementation. Previous research has identified that the school counselor and principal relationship can positively impact multiple levels of the school ecosystem. This impact can be seen at the individual and microsystem levels in various ways, such as decreased burnout and higher job satisfaction for school counselors (Fye et al., 2020a; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016); improved job performance by school counselors (Randick et al., 2018); increased student achievement (Yavuz et al., 2017; Young et al., 2015); more inclusive and equitable learning conditions for all students (Beasley & Ieva, 2022; Boyland et al., 2019; Wikoff & Wood, 2022); and improved school climate (Rock et al., 2017).

Additionally, the school counselor and principal relationship can impact the mesosystem through strengthened school-family-community partnerships (Bryan et al., 2017), especially in the event of a traumatic event or emergency (Kruczek et al., 2022). At the exosystem, working relationships between the school counselor and principal can address systemic inequalities and increase social justice leadership (Lowery et al., 2019). The research identifies that the school ecosystem can improve by implementing the ASCA National Model and cultivating positive school counselor and principal relationships. This study adds to the knowledge of both the ASCA National Model implementation and school counselor and principal relationships.

The results of the first research question indicated a strong statistically significant predictive relationship between the school counselor and principal relationship and the implementation of the ASCA National Model as measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010) and the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021). As the school counselor and principal relationship rating score increased, so did the ASCA National Model implementation rating. This finding aligns with previous findings identifying the school counselor and principal relationship as vital to the success of the school counseling program (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017; Fye et al., 2017; Randick et al., 2018). The study contributes new insights into how the relationship between school counselors and principals can serve as a predictor of ASCA National Model implementation.

The findings of research question two explored if any of the specific subscales of the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (collaboration, communication, mission and vision, respect, responsibility, and trust) predicted ASCA National Model implementation. The *mission and vision* subscale had moderate predictive significance of ASCA National Model implementation. When each subscale was measured separately, only the *mission and vision* subscale score significantly increased as the ASCA National Model implementation rating increased. Roffers (2021) defined the *mission and vision* subscale as having shared goals for the school that increase opportunities for student success. This subscale captured the spirit of school counselors and principals having aligned goals rather than a specific written mission or vision statement. Similar to the findings in this research study, ESC emphasizes collaborative practices prioritizing mutual understanding and common goals, where everyone contributes (McMahon & Mason, 2019). The results identifying *mission and vision* as the most predictive subscale supports the idea that mutual goals are paramount in the success of schools. This aligns with the ecosystem approach that recognizes that no individual should be solely responsible for the success of a school. Instead, ideally, partners come together as part of a broader framework of multiple interconnected systems to provide collaborative interventions, equitable practices, and a focus on success for each and every student (McMahon & Mason, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018b).

Implications

The findings from this research offer implications for school counselors, principals, and training programs. This study answered whether there is a predictive relationship between the school counselor and principal relationship and the extent of a school counselor's implementation of the ASCA National Model. With previous research supporting the implementation of the ASCA National Model (Lapan et al., 2019; Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016), it can be implied that the profession would benefit from an increased focus on the school counselor and principal relationship since it predicts implementation of the ASCA National Model which has been proven to have positive results for students.

Because the results of this study found that implementation of the ASCA National Model is predicted by the school counselor and principal relationship, school counselors and principals could benefit by understanding that the relationship they build with each other could lead to an increase in ASCA National Model implementation. In turn, the ASCA National Model positively impacts the school ecosystem by promoting data-driven, student-centered practices that enhance academic success, social/emotional development, and college and career readiness (ASCA, 2019). This knowledge emphasizes that school counselors can partner with their principal to create a collaborative and positive culture that leads to a healthier school system (McMahon & Mason, 2019). Nourishing the relationship can take time, and often prioritizing collaboration can be challenging (Duslak & Geier, 2016; Jordan, 2022; Kruczek et al., 2022). However, this study shows school counselors and principals that there are potential benefits to prioritizing this relationship. It is of note that when policy, mandates, and legislation support comprehensive school counseling programs, principals are more likely to have knowledge about the ASCA National Model (Cinotti et al., 2022). The *Enhancing Principal School Counselor Relationship Toolkit* can assist in this process (College Board, 2022).

Because principal participants were included in this study, the results are relevant to principals and their role in improving the school ecosystem. The results indicate a predictive relationship between the *mission and vision* subscale and implementation of the ASCA National Model, which can benefit principals by emphasizing the need to prioritize and protect this collaborative time together, specifically the need for aligned goals through their mission and vision. In addition to time together, research has indicated that principals with an accurate understanding of the role of the school counselor are better prepared to support school counselors (Chandler et al., 2018; Lowery et al., 2018). Principals can use this information to prioritize effective relationships, active collaboration, and aligned mission and vision.

Additionally, knowing that the school counselor and principal relationship predicts ASCA National Model implementation can benefit training programs, including counselor education and principal preparation. When counselor education and principal preparation faculty know the predictive value of the school counselor and principal relationship, they can incorporate the importance of the relationship into the curriculum. Faculty can focus on helping counselors- and principals-in-training foster skills to create an effective school counselor and principal relationship that could lead to improved student success through ASCA National Model implementation. Counselor educators can partner with principal preparation programs at their colleges and universities to co-create curriculum on the school system, including how the role of the school counselor can uniquely impact the ecosystems and ways to create an effective school counselor and principal relationship (Brown, 2016). Additionally, counselor educators can enhance school counselor trainees' knowledge and skills of leadership and advocacy to help

prepare them to support the creation of intentional policy regarding the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs (Mullen et al., 2023).

Recommendations for Further Research

Areas for further research include considering instrument application and research design. This study used a new tool to measure the relationship between principals and school counselors. Dr. Roffers published the tool in 2021, and this is the first study to utilize the tool beyond the initial publication. For that reason alone, additional research could utilize the tool and attempt to add reliability and validity information. Additional research could further explore how school counselors and principals rate their relationship. For example, this study, using only participants who worked in elementary schools, found the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating mean score to be 24.81 with a possible range of 6-30. In contrast, Roffers (2021) used only participants who worked in secondary schools and found a mean relationship score of 13.08. This is a substantial difference in mean scores. Similarly, the mean total score for the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey was 47.515, with a possible range of 20–68. The mean score for the SCPIS for school counselors was 46.12, while the mean score for principals was 50.33. This indicates that principals in the study perceived the school counseling program to be more implemented compared to the school counselors in the study. Additional research could further examine the differences to understand the discrepancies in the mean scores for both survey instruments. This could be done through specific sampling methods collected in context, including focusing on specific grade level settings, within a school district, or using matched pairs of school counselors and principals at the same site.

A replication of this study using school counselors and principals from the same school (as matched pairs) could help further validate the instruments and provide further context about the school counselor and principal relationship and its ability to predict implementation of the ASCA National Model. This research design could further investigate how school counselors implement the ASCA National Model, what implementation looks like in the school, or the impact of implementing the ASCA National Model. Additional information about principals' perceptions of their school counselors, or if they understand the role of the school counselor, could also be collected through matched pairs. While matched pairs research design is typically done with experimental studies, it is believed that it could generate beneficial information in a study similar to this one (de Winter & Dodou, 2017). Although there is limited information about this type of research in educational and social science fields, it is believed that the ability to allow the researcher to compare the perceptions of the school counselor and principal relationship of participants who work together would add valuable knowledge to the profession.

Another research design that would be informative is a longitudinal design that could follow school counselor and principal participants through a “pre-test,” a training opportunity, a “post-

test," and a follow-up after a set amount of time. The pre-test could discuss the school counselor and principal relationship and the ASCA National Model implementation. Then, a training opportunity could provide thorough professional development on the ASCA National Model and the school counselor and principal relationship. The post-test could use the same tools as the pre-test to measure any change in perceptions. Finally, the follow-up could measure any change in perceptions or behaviors after a prolonged period of time. Similar research has indicated significant benefits of longitudinal research on educational practices in order to see long-term perspectives and growth (Ertl et al., 2020; Milton & Forlin, 2017).

Limitations

This study had limitations concerning the participants used in the sample. To begin, there was a disproportionate number of school counselor respondents, with 108 school counselor participants (66%) and 55 principal participants (34%). This disproportionality could be because of the topic of the study and more school counselors having an interest in the results. Additionally, those who chose to participate may have had a more positive relationship with their counterpart, indicating potential selection bias, which can be challenging to address. The study had a low response rate, with a 12% response rate for school counselor participants and 4% for principal participants. The low response rate should be acknowledged when generalizing the results to all school counselors and principals. Additional caution should be considered because all of the participants in this study worked in an elementary school and were from a single state in the west south central United States.

Another limitation of this study was the survey instruments used. Both the Principal-Counselor Relationship Rating (Roffers, 2021) and the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (Clemens et al., 2010) had limited psychometric data available. Both tools lack sufficient reliability and validity information, and more data is needed to confirm their effectiveness. Although this study had limitations that could be addressed in future research, the results from this study identified knowledge that has practical implications for the profession.

Conclusion

The ASCA National Model is considered a best practice in creating comprehensive school counseling programs that can improve academic success for students. School counselors are best equipped to implement the ASCA National Model with support from their principal. However, before this study, it was not known if the school counselor and principal relationship predicted ASCA National Model implementation. The study confirms that the overall Principal-Counselor Relationship rating does serve as a statistically significant predictor of ASCA National Model implementation. Additionally, the *mission and vision* subscale, which captures the importance of shared goals between the school counselor and principal, was the only standalone subscale to significantly predict implementation. Overall, this knowledge emphasizes the vital importance of the relationship between school counselors and principals. Having a

shared mission and vision can lead to a school counselor's ability to fully implement a comprehensive school counseling program. This collaborative relationship and ability to implement the ASCA National Model can create a school ecosystem that can nurture the development and success of each and every student.

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Rooted in Joy and Purpose: A Narrative Inquiry into Professional School Counselor's use of Community Cultural Wealth

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Abstract

For too long, P-12 educational spaces have operated under a deficit narrative; giving little to no acknowledgement to the ancestral and traditional knowledge of the communities in which they are located. The authors of this study utilized a qualitative narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of five school counselors who have incorporated forms of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) into their school counseling program. Participants offered a glimpse into their integration of the different forms of capitals (i.e., aspirational, linguistic, navigational, social, familial, resistant) under CCW, and their commitment of changing the deficit narrative traditionally found in P-12 education, into one of empowerment and recognition. The overarching results of this study explores the participating school counselors' motivation, dedication, and responsibility to the community these school counselors experienced through intentional acknowledgement of community wealth.

Introduction

Deficit-based perspectives, or falsely held negative narratives perpetuated by those in power, have historically permeated United States (U.S.) P-12 schools by targeting students and families from marginalized backgrounds (Yosso, 2005). Specifically, deficit narratives have suggested that education is not valued by Communities of Color, which in turn has limited educational opportunities afforded to students from marginalized backgrounds (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Yosso, 2005). To counter these deficit narratives professional organizations and scholars have reiterated the role of individuals in power (i.e., school counselors and school administrators) to close achievement gaps and provide equitable opportunities to all students by evaluating their personal values, beliefs, assumptions, and biases (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019; Lowery et al., 2019; Ratts et al., 2016; Steen et al., 2024). It is necessary to identify how certain beliefs and practices limit and silence Students of Color and discover ways to improve their educational experience (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005). One way to do so is by incorporating community cultural wealth (CCW) in education and school counseling practice.

CCW prioritizes the cultural wealth an individual's community provides, despite social marginalization, the sense of "otherness," and deficits-based perspectives often perpetuated within organizations, systems, and research (Yosso, 2005). In her seminal article, Yosso (2005) identified six forms of CCW: (a) aspirational capital, (b) familial capital, (c) social capital, (d) linguistic capital, (e) resistant capital, and (f) navigational capital. Aspirational capital speaks to the hope and ambitions for one's future regardless of the personal and/or systemic barriers at

hand. Linguistic capital highlights interpersonal and intellectual strengths gained through shared lingual and stylistic experiences that occur as a result of bilingual education. Familial capital is associated with the communal, cultural (including cultural intuition), and historical plentitude nurtured through familial relationships. Beyond immediate family, familial capital can include extended family members such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, and close family friends. Social capital includes practical and emotional peer and community connections to assist with obtaining employment and applying to educational programs. Navigational capital involves maneuvering through, and around social institutions that were not designed to include Communities of Color such as academic institutions, school board policies, and discriminatory hiring practices. Resistant capital refers to the behaviors, beliefs, and commitment to educating future generations to confront and push back on the social and cultural inequities facing Communities of Color.

CCW and its emphasis on the six forms of capital can transform schooling (Yosso, 2005), and the manner in which school counselors deliver a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) that attend to the unique values and assets students and families possess (Clemons, 2024; Purgason et al., 2020; Vela et al., 2024). Similarly, ASCA's professional and ethical standards reiterate the school counselor's role to promote systemic change through advocacy, data, leadership, and direct and indirect student services (ASCA, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2024). Therefore, in this paper we sought to bridge the gap between CCW and the implementation of an equity focused CSCP; we conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of five school counselors who have incorporated forms of CCW into their school counseling program.

Review of the Literature

Leveraging CCW in educational settings has important implications for improving the school experience of students from marginalized communities, which can include students of color, students with disabilities, students with queer identities, migrant students, students within low socioeconomic households, etcetera (Clemons, 2024; Purgason et al., 2020; Vela et al., 2024; Yosso, 2005). When CCW is utilized, students are more engaged, have a greater sense of belonging and self-worth, progress academically, and can change society (Acevedo et al., 2023; Ares et al., 2019). Although benefits exist, few studies highlight the school counselor's role in incorporating CCW into CSCPs. For example, in the education literature, Ares et al (2019) reversed the narrative from the notion of PK-20 marginalized communities as under-resourced to being rich in familial, community, and cultural resources. Additionally, Acevedo and colleagues (2023) posit CCW as the creating a protective factor against racism. While the application of CCW from the education literature aligns with the field of professional school counseling, this direct connection remains minimal, with the need to expand this literature base. In terms of alignment, specifically, grounded in their national model, ethical code, and position statements, ASCA (2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2024) encourages the inclusion of

diversity and equity in program implementation. In tandem with ASCA, scholars have demonstrated that including CCW in school counseling practice can foster effective programming that counters deficit narratives about students' abilities from marginalized backgrounds (Clemons, 2024; Yosso, 2005), though there remains a need to explore how CCW is directly utilized through comprehensive school counseling programming.

CCW within School Counseling Literature

Though there is a breadth of research available within multicultural counseling, higher education, P-12 education, and urban education literature (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023; Czop Assaf & O'Donnell Lussier, 2020; Sellers et al., 2022), school counseling-specific literature on CCW has only recently begun to emerge through conceptual work from Clemons (2024) and Purgason et al. (2020). Purgason et al. (2020) discussed CCW as a catalyst for improving students' and families' connection to their school community and educational experience. They (2020) encouraged school counselors to explore incorporating CCW within the four themes of the ASCA National Model (leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change; ASCA, 2019). In fact, Purgason et al. (2020) suggested that CCW should be considered prior to the implementation of school counseling interventions. Additionally, they offered suggestions for modifying existing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) interventions to reflect CCW informed practices and behaviors. Recommended modifications to MTSS interventions included updating universal screeners and school climate assessments to include questions about representations of cultural identity within the school community; adapting school counselor advising forms to include questions about cultural strengths; and including post-intervention questions related to if and how a school counselors acknowledged an individual's cultural background during an intervention. Finally, Purgason et al. (2020) noted the absence of school counseling research on how school counselors use CCW to inform school counseling interventions. Clemons (2024) recently introduced a conceptual model for school counselors to use when engaging Black American community organizations, such as the Black Churches community, Black Greek Letter Organizations, and Black salons and barbershops. Clemons (2024) posited that school counselors tend to overlook Black American community entities when trying to provide support to Black American students and families within their school communities. Clemons' (2024) work is foundational to this study as it details the relevance of the six forms of CCW to school communities, school counseling practice, and program implementation. Clemons (2024) reminded school counselors of the ethical responsibility to connect community partnerships, student culture, and comprehensive school counseling programming. Clemons (2024) also encouraged future research on how school counselors incorporate CCW and work with community entities to support growth in academic achievement and opportunity for Black students.

However, the empirical study by Vela et al. (2024) revealed that school counselors need to develop more culturally appropriate interventions, use the ASCA National Model, and

Empowerment Model to tailor intervention strategies that emphasize Latine students' CCW. Particularly, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students revealed that during their high school years, their high school counselors helped them prepare for college and be optimistic about their futures (Vela et al., 2024). Conversely, the participants felt that their high school counselors were not helpful in implementing CCW due to limited availability, accessibility, cultural relevance, collaboration with their families, and lack of social justice advocacy (Vela et al., 2024). Vela et al.'s (2024) research is foundational to this study due to its emphasis on incorporating all six forms of CCW capital by going beyond navigational and aspirational capital to support Latine students.

Challenging Deficit Narratives through CSCP and CCW

A CSCP is designed and delivered by school counselors to improve student outcomes (ASCA, 2019). Although few empirical studies exist that bridge the gap between CSCP implementation and CCW, the ASCA National Model includes various components that intersect with CCW's notion to challenge deficit narratives about students of color. Specifically, ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies (2019) require school counselors to self-assess their own mindsets. and behaviors, understand the impact of cultural influences on student success, and create systemic change through their implementation of a CSCP that specifically identifies and addresses the needs of students who are historically underserved. School counselors who intentionally integrate ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies with the six forms of capital in CCW can reduce racial disparities, support students' racial identity development, address cultural and linguistic deficits, bridge the gap between families in schools, (Davis et al., 2013; Delouche et al., 2024; Leon, 2011; Marcelo & Yates, 2019) and ultimately implement a CSCP that defies the deficit narratives limiting students of color access to an equitable education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) as conceptualized by Yosso (2005) in her CCW framework. Community Cultural Wealth was developed to challenge the "outsider" narrative by valuing the contributions Communities of Color bring to society (Yosso, 2005). CRT through Yosso's (2005) lens is interdisciplinary while maintaining the five central tenets (i.e., "(a) the intercentricity of race and racism; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches" [p.73]). Students of color (SoCs) possess several assets the school community can benefit from if regarded as key insights for improving their educational experience (Clemons, 2024; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, the school counselor's background as an advocate is foundational for identifying and dismantling systemic issues and practices that play into the negative narrative about SoC (ASCA, 2022; Hines et al., 2020). Therefore, to acknowledge and build upon SoC's cultural assets, we draw attention to Yosso's (2005) six forms

of capital that school counselors' can leverage, including: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital.

CCW Within the Context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The six forms of CCW incorporate both communal experiences and systemic conditions as they relate to each other. In the same vein, it can be helpful for school counselors to consider Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a touchpoint for contextualizing how to apply CCW within their school counseling programs. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described five systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macro system, and chronosystem) that informs an individual's development. Though primarily situated within the micro- and meso-systems, school counselors' programs and initiatives impact students within all aspects of Bronfenbrenner's system (Boyce & Mecadon-Mann, 2023; Mayes et al., 2022). For example, school counselors employed in public and charter schools are inherently engaged in the exosystem both through their role and also due to their advocacy efforts at the local government level (i.e. school district). School counselors are engaged in the macrosystem through the coordination and leveraging of economic tools and resources to support students and within the larger chronosystem which includes major events such as starting at a new school, graduating, moving households, parental separation and unification, etc.

Rationale for the Current Study and Research Question

To date, there are few empirical studies exploring how school counselors incorporate CCW into comprehensive school counseling programs (Delouche et al., 2024; Vela et al., 2024). At the same time that this study was conducted, there were only two studies exploring CCW in school counseling (i.e., Clemons, 2024; Purgason et al., 2020). Therefore, CCW in school counseling practice requires further exploration. We used qualitative narrative inquiry to explore the experiences, motivations, and implementation strategies of CCW within comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs). To address the dearth of literature on this topic, we have included the stories and perspectives of five school counselors employed in P-12 public school settings and conducted a narrative inquiry into how they conceptualize and incorporate CCW into their relationships with students, caregivers, coworkers, and community members. We also explored the motivating Vela et al. (2024) indicates that school counselors are perceived to support students' navigational and aspirational capital but may struggle to cultivate their linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. The lack of support for linguistic, familial, and resistant capital has been attributed to school counselors' lack of time and availability, failure to collaborate and connect with families, and cultural relevance in programming (Vela et al., 2024). Therefore, the current study seeks to provide a broader perspective of CCW in school counseling by sharing the stories of those who have capitalized on CCW when implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.

The purpose of this study was to enhance school counseling literature and understand how the forms of community cultural wealth (CCW) guide school counselors' beliefs and program implementation. The following question guided the study: How do forms of community cultural wealth influence school counselors' program implementation?

Method

Narrative inquiry is grounded in exploring a phenomena by drawing attention to and having a careful observation of terms and their use (Clandinin, 2023; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Reissman, 2008). In this study, we utilized the Narrative lens to examine CCW and its six forms of capital, providing special attention on school counselors' implementation through their CSCPs. Moreover, foundational to narrative inquiry is its exploration of the stories individuals share and recognizing how these stories are told to convey a message (Clandinin et al., 2018; Hays & Singh, 2023). From these shared stories, each participants' voice is centered and "provides a window into meaning making as a fundamental process" (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 5). Furthermore, in keeping with the six forms of CCW (Delouche et al., 2024; Yosso, 2005), this narrative inquiry centered the "social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42).

Participants

To recruit participants for this study, we utilized purposive sampling as a specific set of criteria was needed to explore the phenomenon of CCW in CSCPs (Hays & Singh, 2023). To meet the study's specific eligibility requirements, participants were required to be (a) 18 years of age or older; (b) certified or licensed school counselor (by their state); (c) currently practicing as a school counselor a in P-12 public, charter or private school; and (d) practicing as a school counselor for at least one year. A recruitment flyer was then sent through several communication channels including social media outlets as well as through the ASCA listserv. Included in the flyer was a QR code for access to a Google Drive folder where potential participants could access Yosso's (2005) seminal article and Delouche and colleagues' (2024) table with CCW definitions. In the description of the study on the recruitment flyer, researchers asked that potential participants would be sharing how factors of CCW influence their program implementation.

Five school counselors participated in this study. Narrative inquiry does not specify a particular number of participants needed and deviates from rigidity (Chase, 2018). Therefore, the stories of these particular five school counselors are highlighted in their particular school culture context, which, in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, reinforced the importance of context and systems All participants were employed in public Title I elementary or middle schools, including one community school and one charter school, located across several U.S. states. All five participants noted working with students and Communities of Color.

Additionally, all participants were fully licensed/credentialed by their state agencies as school counselors. Two participants self-identified as Black or African American, one as Latinx/Hispanic, and two as White or Caucasian. The ages of participants ranged from 25 to 54 years old. Participants each chose a pseudonym for this study, and they were: Elle, Frances, Kit, Lily, and SiaShanel.

Data Collection & Analysis

Before participant recruitment and data collection, we obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval. Participants then completed an informed consent, demographic questionnaire and interest form via university sponsored Qualtrics. Once participants were chosen based on eligibility criteria, they were each contacted via email to schedule an interview. All interviews lasted between 50-70 minutes, were held via university sponsored web-conferencing Zoom platform, and were recorded for audio and video to later be transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and tailored across participants based on replies to an initial open-ended question (i.e., Can you tell us what the phrase community cultural wealth means to you?). According to Narrative inquiry, "researchers do not seek to collect a uniform set of data across participants" (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 9). Therefore, interviews were largely guided by the stories each participant shared and followed-up with questions or comments that would inquire as to incorporation of cultural capital within programmatic elements. In addition, as recommended by Reissman (2008), participants were invited to share any artifacts (e.g., flyers for events, notes from students, etc.) during the interview or sent via email to the research team after the interview was completed.

Once interviews were completed, each was transcribed and analyzed for their essence (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Reissman, 2008). Josselson and Hammack (2021) suggested multiple readings of transcripts, in order to identify thematic content, patterns and cohesion in the narrative. Utilizing thematic analysis as described by Reissman (2008) in narrative inquiry, first the lead and second author read and coded interviews for early impressions of the narrative. Second, the lead and second authors met to discuss early impressions and create consensus among codes (Reissman, 2008). These codes were sent to the third author for final interpretation and agreement. The lead author then took initial impressions from these steps to construct an inclusive narrative and developed broad themes synthesized to reflect categories of CCW (Reissman, 2008). Finally, the research team met to discuss synthesized themes, leaving the lead author to reread transcripts for the culminating analysis.

Researcher Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a vital role within the research process, including data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, 2023). Therefore, it is essential that researchers engage in self-reflection to limit biases that may

interfere with the integrity of the study (Hays & Singh, 2023). A reflexivity statement is utilized in qualitative research to critically examine researchers' perspectives and influences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2023).

Members of this study's research team have all previously served as school counselors in P-12 settings and are all currently counselor educators. The lead author identifies as a Latina-cisgender female who attended lower-income P-12 schools; the second author identifies as a Caribbean American cisgender female who also attended lower-income P-12 schools, and the third author identifies as a Black cisgender female who attended lower-income P-12 schools in the elementary setting. However, once she reached the secondary P-12 school setting, she was often overlooked and underserved due to the higher SES makeup of the school environments. Within the context of implementing forms of CCW in CSCPs, each of the researchers have experience engaging cultural knowledge and reversing deficit-based narratives held against students and Communities of Color. Additionally, narrative inquiry depends on the collaborative development of stories shared between researchers and participants. Narrative inquiry requires analysis and interpretation to explore meaning behind stories and therefore do not emerge in a vacuum (Riessman, 2008). As a result, below, we discuss the methods used to verify the accuracy of the participants' stories.

Trustworthiness Strategies

We utilized several trustworthiness strategies as recommended in qualitative research in order to maximize the rigor of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2023). First, narrative inquiry provides rich and thick descriptions of data as evidenced by the participants who partook in relational interviews (Chase, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2023). After interviews were transcribed, they were sent to participants to ensure accuracy, also known as member checking (Hays & Singh, 2023). Each author kept reflexive journals throughout the duration of the study to limit bias, engage in self-critique, and ensure the results were in the context and voice of participants (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Lastly, the research team engaged in peer debriefing regularly to limit potential biases and check for the accuracy of interpretation (Hays & Singh, 2023; Josselson & Hammock, 2021).

Findings

Collectively, participants' stories of experiences incorporating CCW into comprehensive school counseling programs were varied, yet intentional based on the cultural fabric and strengths of their students and families. Three main themes emerged, which included eleven subthemes. The first theme, *CCW in Practice*, included seven subthemes. The second theme, *Joy and Purpose*, encompassed two additional subthemes. The third theme, *Counting on the Collective*, included three subthemes. These themes and subthemes are explored further in the following sections.

Theme One: CCW in Practice

Participants were explicit in their description of how the six forms of capital (Yosso, 2005) showed up in their daily practice. This particular theme demonstrates explicitly how the forms of CCW influence and/or are present within different aspects of CSCPs (e.g., three major domains: academic, social-emotional, and college-career).The subthemes here were: a) school counselor role as resistant capital; b) "wealth is internal"; c) nuances of linguistic capital; d) navigational capital within the school counselor's role; e) leveraging familial capital; f) extracting navigational capital; and g) cultural humility as essential.

School Counselor Role as Resistant Capital

Through this subtheme, participants exemplified the ethical responsibility of school counselors to engage in advocacy and to create more equitable systems (ASCA, 2022). Stories related described how school counselors have had to advocate at the school and district levels for students, families and their overall program. For example, Elle told the story about her district mandating a clear backpack policy to address safety and security concerns in their district. Students and caregivers pushed back on this policy due to privacy issues and financial concerns associated with purchasing a new backpack.

Elle questioned,

> We're getting guidance from the district that isn't really taking into account the students that I'm interacting with on a daily basis…I don't know if this is really what's best for them, and I feel like we're tasked to figure it out.

Another participant, Lily, is part of a team of Spanish-English bilingual counselors, but constantly needed to remind school staff about families who cannot read or write. Lily described that,

> …Some of our parents don't know how to read or write. So knowing which parents don't …is really important to us…We're a great team because even when the teachers message us and they're like, 'I sent a message to So-So's mom,' and they haven't responded. I'm like, 'Dude, they don't know how to read or write. Can you call them, please?' And it's just knowing these little things that are not so little. It becomes really critical when you're trying to communicate with your families.

"Wealth is internal"

The title of this subtheme comes directly from one of our participants, SiaShanel. When describing CCW overall and telling us about her "signature event" which is her career day, SiaShanel said,

> So when I think of communities, you need those different types of resources that are available in a community for it to be holistic for everybody. ..That's why, I say wealth is internal and not external, because you're your own resource at the end of the day.

She recounted that she has had upwards of 25 community partners attend her career day, including hairstylists, t-shirt designers, physician assistants, small business owners, and several others, adding that, “Wealth is with our community partners.”

Additionally, Frances described specific protective factors within her majority Latine school population. She specifically pointed to the extended family as a protective factor and added a second as the “incredibly powerful, strong protective factor for these kids is that many of them know that their parents risked their lives to come here [to the United States] so that they could have more opportunities. And the children feel that as an impetus to grow and succeed in ways that will make their parents proud.”

Nuances of linguistic capital

Communication proved to be one of the more layered areas of CCW participants encountered. From barriers of spoken language and translation of Indigenous dialects, to encouraging students to feel proud of their multiple intelligences, linguistic capital came up as a source of empowerment at the individual, caretaker, and community levels. Both Lily and Frances shared stories about their students who speak an Indigenous language, highlighting their abilities to be multilingual and how valuable this will be for their futures. In responding to a colleague’s deficit-based beliefs that Indigenous families are unable to help students with homework, Frances suggested,

> Parents can support their children's academic development when they can't read, not just can't read in English, but can't read at all…by providing a quiet space. They can help them by saying it's time to sit down and do your homework. They can help them by helping them keep their bag organized…They can help them by creating a culture where education is important.

In describing using Loteria - a bingo-like game traditional in many Latine countries - Lily’s inclusion of linguistic capital into parent events isn’t just about giving parents information, but about doing so in a way that helps in “learning those complicated key [college] terms…in fun ways the families feel connected to…because we're engaging in something that they're familiar with.”

Navigational capital within the school counselor's role

Navigational capital really came through in how participants provided information to students and families so they felt successful in an otherwise barrier-ridden environment. Both Elle and SiaShanel connected navigational capital with exposure and development of the career domain within their CSCPs. Additionally, since most of our participants worked with newcomer families, their role as a school counselor allowed them to help demystify the U.S. educational system. Elle described explaining educational rights to parents/caretakers by saying,

> "You have rights as a parent. You can come in and say, 'Hey, I want a meeting…' And just like empowering [parents that they] are actually in control of this. This is your child. This is his education."

Likewise, Lily described reading through documents - like 504 accommodation plans - with families, not just for signatures, but for comprehension.

Leveraging Familial Capital

Participants recognized that families must be tapped into to enhance programming, and the overall school culture. Kit shared with us that her school employed a "Dad-visory council"; a group of dads that come in to help with lunch, recess, and within the classroom. She added generally that, "when they [parents] come into the school it helps…change the way the child views the connection between home and school, because normally it's two separate things." SiaShanel, Lily, and Frances all spoke of creating partnerships with families for the sake of empowering caretakers and inspiring students, ultimately strengthening the family unit. SiaShanel focused on a strengths-based perspective, adding

> "When we are able to help our parents see their students…from a strength-based lens…they now see like, 'Oh, well, my child can do that.' So they feel empowered as a parent…to better help and support their child, because they get an opportunity to see their child in a way that they may not have seen that child before...I'm here to partner with them in that."

Extracting Navigational Capital

For many of our participants, aspirational capital wasn't just about instilling hope in the face of obstacles, but to enhance relationships. Kit shared,

> "When I'm doing my classroom lessons or my lunch bunches, I feel like I'm incorporating that [aspirational capital]. Because there's lessons like ability to maintain hopes and dreams...But a lot of my SEL lessons, I do reference how, there's things that we're facing now that are hard or difficult or barriers…And even though you're facing them now when you're young, you still got to try and think about how it's going to impact you later.

Additionally, each participant spoke to conversations with students and families that focused on the future. Lily added, "But I want to make sure that everyone has some sense of hope that we are all aiming on this goal together, and you're not alone."

Cultural Humility as Essential

Although cultural humility is not directly associated as a form of CCW, participants shared that acknowledging their own identities was essential to being culturally responsive. In reference to her identity as a White woman, Frances described,

> "I can't be some kind of like, 'here I am, it's all fixed.' You know, that's not the way it works. And also I don't want to…perpetuate the idea that some white person is just going to come in and be like, 'here I am with my education to fix everything.' That's ridiculous."

In the same vein, Elle added,

> "I'm gonna be honest, as a white woman…I understand the implications of that…So I feel completely honored that the families and students and my coworkers trust me...It's also been a really big empathy building experience for me as well."

And in regard to work with families and students who are newcomers, Lily recounted,

> "I think that it's important for us to acknowledge that there's traumas that happen when we're moving from one country to another, and that there's different mental health resources available. But for us to give ourselves grace and kind of embrace what's happening and the transitions that students might be going through and providing them with resources."

Theme Two: Joy and Purpose

School counselors are often referred to as the heartbeat of the school. Participants in this study embodied this through their motivation to engage with and care for the communities they serve. The subthemes for the second theme, Joy and Purpose were: a) rooted in purpose, and b) sense of responsibility for the community.

Rooted in Purpose

Each of our participants recounted that they felt a great sense of purpose in their roles. Kit elaborated that as the school counselor she "feel[s] like one of the leaders because…any leadership [she] might have is appropriate for [her] role." Becoming emotional and teary, SiaShanel shared,

> "I get happy. I feel purposeful. I feel excited for them [students]. I think that's why the work is so rewarding to me, because my sense of purpose is always strengthened when I know I'm truly making an impact...It's really indescribable. Actually, I just feel like these kids deserve it…I just feel like it's my honor. It's my duty to…open up a door (of) opportunity."

Frances added very matter-of-factly, "I just think so many people feel like their work doesn't really have any actual meaning. And I know mine does."

Sense of Responsibility for the Community

School counselors in this study felt strongly about the impact of their work and felt a duty to serve their communities. Lily explained, "Because at the end of the day, we're helping people.

We're in a profession where we help people to make sure that they're okay…I wouldn't want anything bad to happen if they're under my care." Additionally, Elle takes this sense of duty beyond her school day and shared,

> "I also feel a sense of responsibility to do good by my students. I feel a sense of responsibility to carry that with me outside of just my time in this building. And allow it to impact me in how I interact with people outside."

Counting on the Collective

In keeping with the adage that 'it takes a village,'(Clemons, 2024) participants in this study recognized the vital need of engagement and creativity from all educational partners in order to incorporate CCW into their CSCPs with fidelity. The subthemes here were: a) CCW as a team effort; b) innovate and engage; and c) recognition of limitations.

CCW As a Team Effort

School settings already demand heavy collaboration in order to serve students as best as possible. Participants in this study found that this team effort enhanced CCW in their programming. In particular, Kit felt that since her site recently became a community school, resources have become more available. She described having a community school coordinator with whom she partners on a regular basis. Kit elaborated that "the social capital has increased" through funding, resources, and shared responsibilities. SiaShanel spoke about collaborating with the lead Multi Language Learning teacher specifically and their work running a self-love group for girls. Lily, Elle, and Kit all spoke to working with either a PTA or parent center to increase family engagement through workshops and other activities. Of her involvement with the parent center, Elle specified, "our program works really hand in hand with out parent center. And so, a lot of our program development…coincides with theirs." Elle narrated that working with the parent liaison has helped engage families broadly as an added benefit.

Innovate and Engage

Safe to say that being creative comes with the territory of being a school counselor, and participants in this study were no different. Participants discussed finding creative ways to connect, communicate and be informed to enhance their CSCPs. From poster contests to ensuring guidance lessons are relevant, each participant really goes the extra mile to ensure their school community is cared for. With the goal of changing the narrative around school and law enforcement, SiaShanel shared the connection with her school resource officer and noted,

> It decreases the stereotype that (SRO/law enforcement is) adversarial, and they [students] actually see them as a resource, and somebody that's there to help and support them…because it's like, 'Hey, he's not after me, or Hey, you know, it wasn't a negative experience.' It was different than what even they expected...And I think that that's what we need more of, because we are all in this together.

In her work with elementary students, Frances has found expressive arts as the conduit for creating safety plans. She shared

> And so what I say to the kid, 'I know you've talked about how it's hard for you to talk to people about your feelings…I want you to think of all the people who love you and care about you.' And then, I take a piece of paper [and we write those names down]. We put like names going all the way around [the paper] …And I explain what a safety net is too. I explain like… 'if you're in the circus and you're walking on a high wire and you fall down, and you hit the ground, you could get really hurt. But if you fall and bounce on a safety net, that's going to protect you, right?' So, then once I have all the names in a circle, then I make this little thing kind of connecting them. And then the kid decorates it [goes home and shows their families.] And they're like 'look at all the people who love me.'

Recognition of Limitations

Something that came up as well was the desire to integrate even more aspects of CCW, however not being able to do so for various reasons (e.g., lack of resources and buy-in). Kit shared, "I guess I'd like to build up more of that aspirational capital especially by…working with the community school in terms of maybe mentorship for some students." Elle described wanting to increase familial capital adding,

> I think that is one of the areas that we are still trying to find the magic for because we have 1,100 students in our building and our turnout for events is still not where we want it to be.

In this subtheme, what came up for participants is that working together increased opportunities for CCW integration, but is still a work in progress, especially if other educational partners haven't completely bought into these types of capital as necessary.

Discussion

Notable findings from this study help us to illustrate that these school counselors leverage the forms of Community Cultural Wealth to enhance the educational experience of their students and therefore, their CSCPs. Participants gave concrete examples of what it looks like to utilize different forms of cultural capital, how engaging in these practices bring purpose to their roles, and recognizing the collective efforts of their educational partners. The experiences of these school counselors reflect research suggesting that there are significant implications in adopting CCW to enhance school experiences of marginalized students (Acevedo et al., 2023; Ares et al., 2019; Clemons, 2024; Purgason et al., 2020; Vela et al., 2024). However, new to the present investigation, our study extended previous research, demonstrating empirical evidence of school counselors purposefully incorporation of CCW, especially to change the deficit narrative surrounding marginalized communities.

Reflecting on ASCA's Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (2021), CCW allowed the sample of school counselors in this study to help not just students but also families and educational partners to feel supported and to develop a sense of belonging. Each participant spoke to leveraging familial, aspirational, and navigational capital to strengthen student self-confidence (ASCA, 2021, M.4); increase belief in self to achieve (ASCA, 2021, M.5); understand postsecondary options; and sustain attitudes towards lifelong learning (ASCA, 2021, M.6). For example, Lily spoke of having intentional conversations with caretakers and students about their hopes and dreams; SiaShanel proudly described her career day as a "signature event" that provided students with real-life options for their futures. CCW provided opportunities for the school counselors in this study to address the mindsets and behaviors, focusing on student success as well as providing resources and learning opportunities for families. For example, Lily's program included bilingual guidance lessons and parent workshops, while Frances recounted her advocacy for families whose primary dialects were Indigenous. In addition, category 2 of the mindsets and behaviors (i.e., "School counselors provide culturally sustaining instruction, appraisal and advisement" [ASCA, 2021, p.2]) are incorporated into the CSCPs of these school counselors by elevating cultural wealth within programmatic elements (e.g., SiaShanel inviting community partners and the SRO for mentorship opportunities with students).Thus, unique to our study, we empirically demonstrated that school counselors' CCW-guided actions were in support of ASCA's Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success.

In further alignment with the ASCA National Model (2019), ASCA Ethical Standards (2022), and several positions statements (i.e., anti-racist practices, 2021a; cultural diversity 2021b; equity for all, 2024), incorporation of CCW has presented these school counselors with opportunities to elevate their CSCPs with equity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness at the forefront of their work. Although not specifically mentioned verbatim, through data collection we noticed each of the school counselors in this study created systemic change. Enter the power of narrative inquiry as we recognize that the stories shared are evidence of the daily dedication these school counselors have to increasing access, dismantling barriers, and amplifying the strengths of the community. For instance, Kit's "Dad-visory council" not only invited caretakers into school spaces to help in the classroom and recess, it also created opportunities for engagement with father-figures for all students to interact with - honing in on familial capital that brings "cultural knowledge nurtured among family" (Delouche et al., 2024, p. 246). Additionally, each participant also spoke of collaborating with educational partners or planning on their own for the celebration of cultural heritage months (e.g., African American History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, etc.). These celebrations elevated cultural diversity and wealth within the school and is a direct ethical responsibility (ASCA, 2022, A.10) of the school counselor to "actively establish a safe, equitable, and affirming school environment" (p. 5). Furthermore, the subtheme *School Counselor Role as Resistant Capital*, directly supports our ethical commitment to be systemic change agents (ASCA, 2022). In sum, incorporating CCW into CSCPs reinforces how school counselors are able to serve in their role, elevates professional guidance from ASCA,

cultivates the expansion of empirical literature on CCW and school counseling, and could ultimately bolster the school counseling profession.

Though Clemons (2024) and Purgason et al. (2020) published the most recent scholarship exploring the necessity of incorporating CCW into CSCPs, our present empirical study expands the understanding of what CCW actually looks like in practice. While Clemons (2024) emphasized the need to create partnerships with Black community groups to cultivate the educational experience of Black American students, similarly, some of our participants engaged in specific activities that are well-known in their ethno-racial communities. For example, Lily's use of Loteria to teach families about college terminology was a direct use of existing traditions within Latine communities to impact learning. Purgason and colleagues (2020) stressed the importance of infusing CCW into MTSS. SiaShanel exemplified this practice through ensuring that her career day brings in a diverse group of community members (navigational capital - career domain - tier 1) and co-leads small groups with colleagues focusing on self-love (social capital - tier 2); Kit instilled hope in the face of obstacles into her SEL guidance lessons (aspirational capital - tier 1); and Frances ensured that her Indigenous student population received resources, including any needed assessment (navigational capital - tier 3). Overall, our research enriched the scholarly discourse on CCW specific to school counselors' comprehensive programming, providing the first empirical study on the subject, thereby extending the present conceptual articles.

Limitations

The narratives shared in this study illustrate the experience of five school counselors located in several U.S. states at the elementary and middle school levels. The purpose of qualitative research, and especially narrative analysis, is not to obtain generalizable results (Hays & Singh, 2023; Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Thus, the stories presented are a reflection of these particular participants. However, certain limitations must be addressed. For example, participants were not gender or ethno-racially diverse, thus not entirely representative of the larger population of school counselors (though our profession is largely cisgender female and white). Another limitation was in obtaining a larger sample size. Though narrative inquiry has no specific number of participants as ideal, five is a relatively small number of participants. At the same time, given CCW is a construct more recently discussed in the school counseling literature, it stands to reason that the school counselors familiar with this construct and thus eligible for this study may be a smaller pool at this time. Finally, a potential limitation is that although school counselors in this study were incorporating aspects of CCW into their CSCPs, there were a few participants who focused solely on ethno-racial aspects of cultural wealth which may have narrowed the potential stories to be told, yet also offer helpful insight in suggesting future scholarship.

Recommendations for Future Research

Our findings expand on the existing literature on school counselor implementation of CCW. However, more research is needed to understand school counselor behaviors and attitudes toward implementing CCW within school counseling practice and how these behaviors and actions impact the communities they serve. For example, our participants discussed a need for more familial engagement and attendance at school events; researchers should explore school counselor beliefs and attitudes toward using CCW to build student and caregiver connection to the school community. We would also like to know more about parents' and caretakers' perceptions of their school counselor's efforts to connect with them through the incorporation of CCW. Though our sample size is appropriate for narrative inquiry, in the future, researchers could study a larger, more diverse sample of school counselors through quantitative or mixed-method research designs to further understand what forms of CCW are used in their CSCPs. Last, we noticed that the ethno-racial applications of CCW were often discussed by our participants. Researchers can investigate how school counselors implement CCW into their CSCPs through the lens of disability status, LGBTQ+ orientation, or other aspects of student identity. We have confirmed that school counselors are implementing CCW, and further research is now needed to examine how school counselor attitudes and behaviors impact their school community.

Implications for School Counselors and Comprehensive School Counseling Programs

Through our findings, we highlighted the practical application of CCW, the motivation and purpose associated with implementing CCW in school counseling programs, and finally, the strength of the collective to develop innovative, creative, and inclusive initiatives and programs. School counselors can use this information to broaden the impact of their CSCP, including but not limited to advocating with and for students to receive fair and appropriate educational opportunities, creating culturally relevant suicide prevention programming, and deepening faculty and district understanding of the complexities related to both the fears and pride related to immigration journeys, etc.

In our first theme, CCW in Practice, our participants noted the importance of the school counselor's role in fostering and utilizing resistant capital to advocate for the communities they support. Participants also spotlight CCW as a strength (i.e. "wealth is internal") and found that engaging families, caregivers and community partners was integral to supporting students. Incorporating linguistic capital and familial capital to guide families in developing awareness of the programs and opportunities available to them was also emphasized. School counselors can look to the Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) framework (Lemberger, 2010), which is grounded in social justice and systems-based practices, expanding upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Mainly, ASE encourages school counselors to reflect on the reciprocal relationship between the student and the school system they interact with. ASE- informed

school counselors support students in using their voice to advocate for themselves and create interventions and policies that reflect the needs identified by students.

In our second theme, Joy and Purpose, we found that our participants felt a deep sense of purpose in their role as well as a responsibility to advocate for and with their students. School counselors like Lily and Elle may also feel a passion to develop programs and initiatives that are in the best interests of their school community. While this passion motivates school counselors to do student-centered work, attention should be given to how student-centered work is implemented. Culturally humble practices such as curiosity and reflection are encouraged to ensure that the initiatives implemented are not centered around the school counselors' point of view, which could potentially include unintentional biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that can cause further harm to students and families.

School counselors can combine the joy and purpose they find in their profession with respectful inquiry to amplify the cultures and traditions within their school community. School counselors should not only demonstrate awareness of the cultures around them, but also dig into how students participate in their own culture. This can be done by connecting with students to learn about their families, traditions, and concerns they may have. This connection can be fostered by being a visible entity on campus, hosting formal and informal group discussions, and encouraging students to share their perspectives in ways that may be comfortable to them such as including a digital (e.g., a QR code), physical comment box by the school counselor's office, or through self-expressive means like music, art, poems, etc.

In our third and final theme, Counting on the Collective, our participants highlighted the impact that school counselors have when they lean on the forms of CCW and leverage community connections to address education access and equity within their school systems. In both themes, CCW in Practice and Counting on the Collective, our participants discussed the benefits of collaboration as a catalyst for innovation and engagement with their school community. As also noted by Clemons (2024), we recommend that school counselors host events in areas that are of importance to students' culture, such as places of worship, neighborhoods, and playgrounds, which help to bring the school closer to the community as opposed to seeing school as an ominous structure that doesn't allow for input from the communities it is supposed to serve.

Additionally, our participants shared that creativity and innovation is fostered when school counselors incorporate the community. The participants in our study found that activities like hosting poster contests and collaborating with outside entities such as doctors' offices, places of worship, law enforcement, restaurants, etc., can build a relationship between the community and its students and caregivers. As a result, school counselors may engage in collaboration, which enables opportunities to broach topical conversations and develop partnerships around

all six forms of CCW (i.e., aspirational, familial social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational capital). On and off-campus crafting events, job fairs, food and music events, school and community information sessions, etc., can be instrumental in students and caregivers feeling seen, heard, and appreciated. The goal of community collaboration is not to have students assimilate into a culture that is not their own, instead, the goal is to acknowledge similarities, differences, and celebrate the strengths that students choose to share with the collective.

In this article, we highlighted how school counselors incorporate CCW within CSCPs, expanding upon an area of research that has been conducted in P-12 education, and has been recently emerging conceptually in school counseling. Our participants shared their approach to creating avenues for families to build reciprocal connections between students, caregivers, and the school community. School counselors should consider how the six forms of CCW are addressed within their CSCPs and MTSS interventions. While reviewing their programs, school counselors should also interrogate their beliefs and perspectives of their students as individuals with cultural strengths versus individuals with cultural deficits. Taking the initiative to educate students and caregivers of their rights and access to programs can help support the development of skills to navigate institutions that intentionally or unintentionally fail to include students who are not white, English-speaking, and/or accustomed to the U.S. educational system (Lemberger- Truelove et al., 2018; Vela et al., 2024). By doing this, school counselors can support the development of resistant capital that students and caretakers may already encompass but may benefit from having an ally who sits within the system or institution, such as the school counselor does.

Conclusion

As ever-evolving legislation continues to impact our political and societal fabric, including P-12 education, in tandem with a critical race and ecological lens, it is crucial for school counselors to leverage the strengths of their community to combat as well as interrogate the systemic deficit-based stereotypes that our students and their families face daily. Innovation and engagement from the community can only be achieved when institutions (including the individuals within the institution) are transparent about the opportunities available to their community, encourage input from community members, and design their mission and action plan to mirror the needs of the community. School counselors should leverage the six forms of CCW to tailor their programs to the community, versus expecting the community to tailor themselves to the institution. By connecting with communities on a cultural level, schools may be able to see more academic and social engagement, collaboration, and trust from the students and caregivers in their community.

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Appendix A: Rooted in Joy & Purpose

Table 1
Findings: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes						
CCW in Practice	School Counselor Role as Resistant Capital	"Wealth is internal"	Nuances of linguistic capital	Navigational capital within the school counselor's role	Leveraging Familial Capital	Extracting Navigational Capital	Cultural Humility as Essential
Joy and Purpose	Rooted in Purpose	Sense of Responsibility for the Community					
Counting on the Collective	CCW As a Team Effort	Innovate and Engage	Recognition of Limitations				

The Spirit Murders of Black Male School Counselors

By Jhamarcus A. Pharaoh, University of Georgia

Abstract

In recent literature, scholars have begun to show how Black male educators are being spiritually murdered by a system that was never intended to house black bodies. Black male school counselors specifically are as magical as unicorns and are as powerful as some of our favorite childhood superheroes. Their strength and mystical presence often makes the world forget that they are also human. To their detriment, Black male school counselors are being recruited to use their superpowers while simultaneously being spiritually murdered by the same systems recruiting them. In this manuscript I aim to (1) articulate how the school counseling profession is a Historically White Institution and how it is spiritually murdering Black men in the profession; (2) explore how the intersection of being both Black and male influences the experiences of Black male school counselors; and (3) use the Ecological Social Justice School Counseling theory to provide recommendations for using antiracism, equity, and social justice to identify and dismantle school counseling as a Historically White Institution and support the unique needs of Black male school counselors.

Introduction

"Until there is a significant public outcry from people of influence and power, the advancement of young men and boys of color is likely to remain constrained. In the worst ways, the racism, discrimination, and racial oppression that they have experienced and continue to endure are central to many of their struggles (Moore et al., 2021).

In recent literature, scholars have begun to show how Black male educators are being spiritually murdered by a system that was never intended to embrace them. Black male school counselors specifically are recruited to fix problems they did not create. Problems that are products of historically institutionalized racism. Black male school counselors are being recruited into a system that wants to use them while simultaneously killing them. In this conceptual article and call to action, we first provide an overview of the constructs: Historically White Institutions and spirit murdering (i.e., the harm Historically White Institutions have on Black educators, which, up until this point, has primarily been discussed in the context of faculty in higher education and K-12 classrooms). Second, we examine school counseling both historically and presently, applying the concepts of Historically White Institutions and spirit murdering to school counseling, drawing parallels between higher education and K-12 schools. Next, we unpack how the intersection of being both Black *and* male influences the experiences of Black male school counselors. Here, we synthesize current school counseling literature to explore the experiences men have in a women-dominated space and the intersectional experiences of Black men in a profession primarily populated by White women. Finally, we utilize the Ecological Social Justice School Counseling theory (Johnson & Brookover, 2021; Johnson et al., 2022) to provide

recommendations for using antiracism, equity, and social justice to identify and dismantle school counseling as a Historically White Institution and the resulting spirit murdering of Black male school counselors. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to shed light on the experiences of Black male school counselors in a profession that has historically and presently been highly racialized and gendered, and through an antiracist and systemic lens, provide recommendations to better support the unique needs of Black male school counselors.

Historically White Institutions: The Crime Scene for Spirit Murders

Not to be confused, Predominantly White Institutions and Historically White Institutions are similar but different. Words matter because word choice can be the difference between a story being told accurately or misrepresented. *Predominantly* White Institutions, or PWIs, in scholarly literature typically refer to colleges and universities in which the majority of students are white (Melton, 2023). Linguistically, PWI refers to the general demographic makeup of an institution or space (Melton, 2023). For example, a predominantly white neighborhood refers to a neighborhood that is primarily composed of White people. Differently, *Historically* White Institutions refer to the *history* of an institution being created and function to uphold white supremacy. As such, Historically White Institutions like higher education are spaces that were designed *without* Black and Brown bodies in mind, except for exploitation and/or labor (Dancy & Edwards, 2020; Harvey, 2023). The conception of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is the direct result of Black and Brown students being excluded from higher education (Bracey, 2017). Historically White Institutions were designed as structures to keep Black and Brown bodies out, and many of those structures still exist today (Dancy & Edwards, 2020).

Scholars have argued that although Federal law has overturned segregation, many Historically White Institutions like PWI's do not commit to Black students unless they want to recruit them for their athletic programs (Bracey, 2017) and their primary commitment to Black faculty is to spearhead diversity initiatives (Abdul-Raheem, 2016; Fleetwood et al., 2010; Griffin et al., 2011; Lynch-Alexander, 2017; Kelly et al., 2017;). Although this may not be the *intention* for all PWIs, it still stands that unless a Historically White Institution like higher education critically examines the structures, policies, and practices that ground their institution, they are likely to perpetuate White supremacy as it was initially intended (Dancy & Edwards, 2020; Harvey, 2023;). Emphasizing the *history* of Historically White Institutions draws attention to the *institution's* foundation. Smith et al. (2011, p.64) describe Historically White Institutions as "racial climates that are replete with gendered racism, blocked opportunities, and mundane, extreme, environmental stress (MESS)." The environment that these institutions create are deadly to Black bodies because they were initially designed to exclude them - they are crime scenes for spirit murders.

Scholars have articulated that spirit murders occur when Black and Brown bodies take up space and attempt to navigate Historically White Institutions, like schools (Johnson & Bryan, 2016;

Love, 2016). Spirit Murders also occur when Black and Brown bodies are in positions of power and authority in Historically White Institutions like higher education (Johnson & Bryan, 2016). According to Love (2016, p. 2), "spirit murdering within a school context is the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism." Examples include physical violence against Black children by the adults who are tasked with looking after them at school. It could also include Black students being humiliated and dehumanized at school due to racially charged biases and practices (Love, 2016). Love encourages readers to consider the physical violence inflicted on the bodies of Black children and the spiritual violence they are forced to endure from the moment they enter schools. Love (2016) explicitly asks the reader, "How does a child learn after being handcuffed, or thrown around the room, by a person who is supposed to protect them, or racially insulted at their high school graduation for being Black? How does a Black child live, learn, and grow when her spirit is under attack at school, and her body is in danger outside the classroom?" (p. 2).

Johnson and Bryan (2016) applied the concept of spirit murdering in the context of higher education by stating, "Black men are metaphorically murdered in the academy. The spirit murders committed by the hands of White students, faculty, and racist institutional policies and practices perpetuate such murders" (p. 165). The authors articulated that the many ways institutionalized racism shows up when Black faculty work in Historically White Institutions, like higher education, represent the *bullets* that murder them. Examples of these bullets can include, but are not limited to, experiences with racism and microaggressions from White colleagues and White students. This could involve White students and colleagues routinely questioning the legitimacy of Black faculty as researchers and instructors, despite their credentials. It could also include White students challenging their authority as the professor in the classroom, to name a few (Johnson & Bryan, 2016).

Navigating these racially charged experiences, whether they be overt or covert, is typically part of a larger construct of systemic racism (Grooms et al., 2021). Navigating these racially charged experiences is also *expected*, according to some Black male faculty (Ellis & Moss, 2024; Malone & Ford, 2023). According to Malone and Ford (2023), "microaggressions are part of the game for the academy" (p. 108). In general, systemic racism has been cited to have negative implications for the general well-being of Black people. Although racism is not biological, it has been mentioned to heavily influence mortality and long-term health among Black people (CDC, 2021; Krumholz et al., 2022). According to Krumholz et al. (2022), "Black people in the United States are more likely to die young—not because there is some intrinsic biological risk, but because of racism" (p. 1). Krumholz and colleagues also state that the many health conditions Black people are dealing with are influenced by a variety of complex social factors, with systemic racism being one of the most detrimental, whether police brutality (Alang et al., 2017; Locklear, 2023), financial strain due to limitations for economic mobility (Alang et al., 2017; Krumholz et al., 2022), racial discrimination in health care (Hamed et al., 2022; Yearby et al.

2022), or exposure to racial trauma (Cénat, 2022; Scott-Jones & Kamara, 2020), the impact of systemic racism on Black bodies is detrimental to their overall wellbeing and quality of life. Systemic racism, along with lived experiences of racial trauma, has also been cited to negatively impact mental health among Black men in America (DeAngelis, 2024; Motley & Banks, 2018; Watkins et al., 2009).

Like that of America's DNA, systemic racism is also in the bricks that built the structure of higher education. Current literature on the spirit murders of Black men in education is situated in higher education exclusively (Johnson & Bryan, 2016). More broadly, to our knowledge, the concept of spirit murder in educational settings has only been discussed in the context of higher education (Johnson & Bryan, 2016) and the K-12 classroom (Love, 2013, 2016), but not in the context of school counseling.

School Counseling: Historical Context to Guide Dismantling Systems

School counselors are recognized as change agents (Dowden et al., 2024), as their work is guided by a code of ethics that centers on social justice (ASCA, 2022). The critical work of school counselors transcends the general mental health and academic preparedness of students. The development of data-driven comprehensive school counseling programs by school counselors also disrupts systems of injustice for the betterment of students individually and society at large (Devlin et al., 2023; Young & Kaffenberger, 2011). ASCA-aligned school counselors who implement comprehensive school counseling programs adopt a tiered approach to address the systemic needs of schools (Dowden et al., 2024), thereby disrupting systems that perpetuate injustices in school settings. This is especially important as the diversity among students is tied to inequitable outcomes regarding academic trajectories and the school-to-prison pipeline (Elias, 2013; Love, 2019; Underwood et al., 2020; Villegas et al., 2012).

The growing diversity of students in K-12 settings has outpaced the diversity among educators, teachers, and school counselors alike (ASCA, 2021a; Grooms et al., 2021; Kohli, 2018; Underwood et al., 2020). The growing diversity among students is accompanied by a diverse range of challenges unique to their various social identities, including race, ability status, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and citizenship. Those challenges do not stay home; they come to school every day with students. Growing diversity among students also means there are more opportunities for students to interact with people who do not look like them or have a different background, which at times creates a breeding ground for conflict, especially in a society that is socially and politically polarized (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Saad, 2021). For example, in recent studies, some students have openly expressed having racist attitudes and beliefs (Learning for Justice, 2019) while others have reported being targets of racism from their peers and/or teachers (McKinnon et al., 2024). Race is not the only component that distinguishes people. In this example, we can observe that when people from different backgrounds are in the same environment, those differences can result in conflict or harm. To aid in combating

these problems, including dismantling the systems that marginalize students, diverse school counselors are being recruited (Fletcher et al., 2022; Schultz, 2024).

While ASCA and the school counseling profession presently support increasing diversity among school counselors and dismantling systemic structures that promote inequality, I argue that, like higher education and K-12 classrooms, the school counseling profession is also a Historically White Institution, one that was designed *without* Black and Brown bodies in mind. School counselors are bound by an ethical code that promotes the demolition of oppressive systems (ASCA, 2022). To engage in systemic change and social justice beyond a performative nature, we must examine, interrogate, and dismantle systems that uphold White supremacy within the profession. To do that, we must critically examine the history of school counseling to understand why it is also a Historically White institution.

The school counseling profession has existed for over 100 years, but its focus on social justice is relatively new. According to Gysbers (2010), the school counseling profession as we know it today started in the early 1900s as vocational guidance. Frank Parsons is known as the "father of guidance" for his contributions to career counseling (L. K. Jones, 1994). Though his contributions were pivotal to how school counselors conduct career counseling, his contributions are still criticized for favoring White people above all, more specifically, White males (James-Gallaway et al., 2024; Zamani-Gallaher, 2017). During the time of Parsons' contributions, desegregation had not happened yet, and the opportunities for upward mobility were inequitably distributed between White and non-White people, as well as men and women.

Policies such as the National Vocational Act of 1917 reinforced segregation in education, discriminatory curricula in vocational training, and inequitable federal funding allocation (James-Gallaway et al., 2024; Zamani-Gallaher, 2017). This policy also favored college-educated White women while simultaneously excluding Black women (Alshabani et al., 2020). As a result of this discriminatory nature, Black people were *purposely* steered toward lower-level careers and job opportunities (Zamani-Gallaher, 2017), contributing to the existing educational and economic gaps we see today between Black and White Americans. The school counseling profession has evolved over time, but the progress needed remains vast.

Some historians note that desegregation in schools did not occur until 1954, marked by the landmark Brown v. Board of Education ruling, which declared the "separate but equal" doctrine unconstitutional (Green 2004; Grooms et al. 2021). Thus, desegregation occurred over 50 years *after* the conception of the school counseling profession. Globally speaking, the monumental Brown v. Board of Education ruling was viewed by some as a victory in the context of social justice. Still, it was also accompanied by many unforeseen consequences in education, including the illegal removal of Black educators to be replaced by less qualified White educators (Fenwick,

2022; Green, 2004). Following the 1954 ruling, the school counseling profession faced numerous calls to action, including the implementation of social justice. However, these calls to action originated in the 1970s, approximately 16-20 years after desegregation and 70 years *after* the establishment of the school counseling profession (Pignato, 2025). Relatedly, ASCA formally adopted a position on cultural diversity in 1988 and the position statement on "equity for all students" in 2006 (ASCA, n.d.-b; William & Mary School of Education, 2025). Hence, while the school counseling profession has existed for almost 125 years, from our understanding, school counseling-specific statements on diversity and equity for the profession are less than 40 years old. As such, the majority of the profession's history has been grounded in Whiteness, until shifts in more recent years. At the time of this publication, the Brown v. Board of Education ruling occurred 71 years ago, while ASCA's official stance on cultural diversity is roughly 37 years old.

Further, the school counseling profession to date is made up almost exclusively of White women (ASCA, 2021a). Approximately 75,000 school counselors were surveyed in ASCA's State of the Profession Report (2021a), where 77% self-identified as White compared to 10% who identified as Black. 87% of the respondents also identified as women compared to the 11% who identified as men. It's important to mention that not all school counselors belong to this professional organization or any organization for a plethora of reasons (i.e., financial barriers, awareness of the different organizations, sense of belonging) (Bedini et al., 2022; O'Donnell, 2021; Thompson, 2012). However, the current school counselor literature mirrors the data presented in ASCA's report (Chavis, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022).

In sum, the 125-year-old school counseling profession has made tremendous strides toward equity for all, but it is not immune to the sins of the past finding their way back to harm the future. The school counseling code of ethics calls for systemic change, social justice, and increasing representation of diverse school counselors (ASCA, 2022). Just as Johnson and Bryan (2016) argued that Black male faculty are being spiritually murdered in Historically White Institutions like higher education, I argue that the school counseling profession is also a Historically White Institution in which Black male school counselors are being spiritually murdered as the current landscape of the profession does not provide formal guidance or support for Black men who are navigating a profession that is heavily influenced by both race and gender. As such, it is imperative to investigate and understand the experiences of Black male school counselors within the context of the school counseling profession as a Historically White Institution.

Spirit Murders of Black Males in School Counseling

The *expectation* that Black educators will fix what is broken in the educational system is not new in literature; in fact, this expectation is one of the driving forces behind diversifying the teaching and school counseling profession alike (Billingsley et al., 2019; Dowden et al., 2024; Grooms et

al. 2021; Shillingford et al., 2022). Black educators across levels (K-12 and higher education) are often hired to execute diversity initiatives like bridging educational gaps among students of color (academic, discipline, and educational gaps) and attending to the systemic and cultural needs of educational spaces (Dowden et al., 2024; Grooms et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2017). Black *male* K-12 educators specifically are often recruited to "secure, administer and govern the unruly Black boy in school" (Brown, 2012, p. 299). Brown was specifically referring to the experiences of Black male teachers and how they are *positioned* to police Black students, but in recent literature, we observe the expectation to police black boys is also a shared experience among male school counselors as well (Chavis, 2024; Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022).

Presently, men, especially Black men, are vastly underrepresented in school counseling literature. This can only be partially explained by them being significantly underrepresented in the school counseling profession (Chavis, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022) but also being underrepresented in school counseling training programs (Clark et al., 2024; Crockett et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022). In addition to being a marginalized group in the profession based on their male identity, Black male school counselors are also marginalized by their racial identity. Researchers have articulated that to truly reap the benefits of supporting diversification efforts among educators across all levels, an intersectional approach is critical to understanding the complexity of individuals with marginalized identities (Dowden et al., 2024; Griffin et al., 2011).

Black male school counselors operate on a pendulum swinging back and forth between accommodation and resistance to "survive the profession" (Lynn, 2006, p. 2500). For example, Black male school counselors navigate isolation as well as the negative stereotypes and stigmas associated with men working in female-dominated professions and men working with children. Black male school counselors must remain hyperconscious of how their *maleness* shows up in a space dominated by women while also being hypervigilant about how their *blackness* shows up in spaces dominated by whiteness.

Generally, the school counseling literature lacks a focus on *males* and in particular *Black males* (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Crockett et al. 2018; Hilts et al., 2023; Rodgers & Furcron, 2019; Um & Li, 2024); this lack of representation in the literature parallels the underrepresentation in the profession itself. For instance, I have reviewed approximately 550 abstracts from peer-reviewed school counseling-related manuscripts that have been published in the last 15 years; in this search, I have found only four publications that focused exclusively on *male* school counselors (Chavis, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Moore, 2022; Gueh, 2020). Within those four studies, only two centered the experiences of *Black male* school counselors (Moore, 2022; Gueh, 2020). While it is possible that there exists other studies on male school counselors (specifically Black male school counselors), my observations reinforce the underrepresentation of men, particularly Black men, in the school counseling literature.

Similarly, *Professional School Counseling* published a special issue on males of color and school counseling (Moore et al., 2021). Presenting 19 theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative articles, Moore and colleagues critically examined the intersectionality between maleness and Blackness in educational spaces. The authors recounted multiple articles that centered the experiences of Black boys and young men in P-12 settings, as well as higher education. We appreciate this groundbreaking and imperative special issue that provided a novel, timely, and highly needed contribution to the school counseling profession. Although this special issue centered Black males within the context of school counseling, to the best of our knowledge, the special issue focused on *youth,* thereby lacking content specific to *adults:* school counselors of Color, including a lack of content specific to Black male school counselors.

Furthermore, this scarcity of literature on Black male school counselors contradicts ASCA's recommendations. In their position statement on Anti-Racist Practices, ASCA (2021b) recommended the recruitment and retention of diverse school counselors. Next, in their position statement on Cultural Diversity, ASCA (2021c) relayed, "school counselors are positioned to actively become part of the solution where cultural diversity is fully embraced." ASCA is clear on their support for diversity within the profession, as culturally competent school counselors are change agents for social justice. The research and literature created in the profession inform the practices and impact of school counselors who lead this collective work.

Male School Counselors

According to Crockett et al. (2018), women in counseling training programs outnumber males by a ratio of 2:1, reflecting a decline since the 1960s. In Crockett's study, among the 300 students enrolled in the master's counseling training program, 90% were women. Little information is known about the experiences of men in women-dominated training programs (Crockett et al., 2018). Still, research from international *and* interdisciplinary literature highlights that the underrepresentation of men in women-dominated professions create unique experiences for men that are often negative (Burt et al., 2020; Callender, 2020; Crockett et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2022; MacWilliams et al., 2012). These experiences include, but are not limited to, tokenization, isolation, and encounters with microaggressions, all of which have been reported by male school counselors in recent literature (Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022).

Male school counselors face a unique set of challenges shaped by their social identities. Male school counselors navigate role conflict due to the stereotypes associated with their social identities. For instance, Chavis (2024) conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of male school counselors in elementary school settings. The goal was to unpack the unique experiences males have in "nontraditional career fields" (Chavis, 2024, p. 19). While performing non-counseling duties, participants in Chavis' (2024) study reflected how they were *positioned* for and assigned work expectations based on their male social identity. James, a Black male

school counselor in the study, reflects on how he was positioned as a disciplinarian due to his maleness. James reports that he, along with a male P.E teacher, were both assigned bus duty. School buses are one of the beacons for misbehavior among school-aged children (Volz, 2024), so naturally, the two men assigned to that would be on the frontline to address disciplinary issues when they arose. Male school counselors in this study also reported being asked to be more present in certain parts of the building to control student behavior. As such, in the present example, it appears that the positioning of males as disciplinarians exists not only because of the participants male identity but may be exacerbated due to the dual role school counselors navigate as both a counselor and an educator often performing tasks that converge and at times conflict with their role as school counselor (Levy & Lemberger- Truelove, 2021).

School counselors are not only bound by their *counseling* code of ethics (ASCA, 2022; ACA, 2014), but they are also bound by their code of ethics as *educators*. As educators, school counselors are expected to intervene in safety-related situations, which could include breaking up fights. According to the National Education Association (2020), educators are ethically bound to "make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or to health and safety." This ethical standard is in direct conflict with the ACA (2014, p.3) ethical standard that charges counselors with "safeguarding the integrity of the counselor-client relationship." As such, this dual identity of being both an educator and a counselor creates role confusion and ambiguity for school counselors (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021), which may be increasingly experienced by male school counselors who also face non-counseling expectations due to their male identity.

To discuss the examples utilized in the study by Chavis, one study participant, Luke, a male school counselor, explicitly stated he believed disciplinarian responsibilities were "put on him" because he's male (Chavis, 2024, p. 89). Similar to Luke, participants Matthew and Bill also attributed their assigned non-counselor duties to their male identities. Matthew reported that he was tasked with restraining children because he's physically stronger than the women. Matthew also communicated being explicitly asked to discuss the amount of time a student should be suspended from school, another direct conflict with ASCA's (2022) ethical standard (i.e., to avoid inappropriate roles involving discipline). The expectation for male school counselors to perform these specific non-counseling duties is not only outside the scope of school counseling practice, but also damages the school-counselor relationship, distorting the image of the male school counselor and weakening their therapeutic alliance with students (Rhodes, 2024).

In another example from the Chavis (2024) study, participant Paul depicted how the duties of other professionals are placed on school counselors when convenient (i.e., being asked to deliver annual health lessons to male students, simply because they shared gender with the male students, and because the *female* nurse, who was charged with this task, *didn't want to*).

Paul's experience highlights that even when trained staff are available to perform their job tasks in schools (i.e., the school nurse), these professionals can pass their responsibilities on to male school counselors, primarily based on gender preferences. In addition to being requested or *positioned* to perform non-counseling duties related to their male social identity (i.e., discipline, dealing with angry parents, moving heavy items), male counselors must be hypervigilant about their interactions with children, due to stereotypes. When men choose to work with children, especially in elementary school settings, parents may be apprehensive, fearing that their kids will become victims of predatory behavior from male educators (Bryan, 2020).

All of the participants in Chavis' study described or referenced the caution male school counselors must take while working with children. All participants expressed that even with society's "modern and progressive" attitudes about men, stereotypes around sexual deviancy remain constant (p. 93). Male school counselors bear the burden of implementing "extra layers of caution" to protect themselves and their professional identity (p. 93). One of the participants stated that he walks around every day, *knowing* that some people may think he is a "pervert" because he works with children (p. 93). He described having always to be hyperconscious when working with young girls. He later added that, based on all that is happening in the world regarding predatory behavior, he is now hyperconscious of working with both young girls and boys. He attributed this added layer of caution to being a*n occupational hazard* of working with children as a man.

For instance, Antoine, a Black male school counselor, recounts a time when a parent explicitly told him, "I don't like you being around my daughter, and I don't like you working here" (Chavis, 2024, p. 93). Antoine attributed this encounter to his maleness. A final example of men navigating the role of school counselor is reflected in the following. Mark, an older male counselor, stated he had to keep his office door open when meeting with students, a double standard he was keenly aware of. Mark later said, "You just don't do anything, that would *look suspicious*...allegations have a way of sticking, so you just leave that door open" (Chavis, 2024, p. 94).

Black Male School Counselor Experiences

Some participants in Chavis' (2024) study highlighted not only the underrepresentation of Black men in school counseling, but also provided insight into society's expectation, or lack thereof, for Black men holding school counseling positions. To illustrate, Antoine, a Black male school counselor, stated, "...people would walk into the building, and are shocked because they thought that I was the custodian or PE teacher. I told them I'm the counselor, not the PE teacher. You hear… 'Oh, I've never seen a man school counselor before." Antoine's statement not only acknowledged the underrepresentation of Black men in school counseling but also addressed society's *expectation* that Black men should only occupy low-paying service careers, excluding those in athletics (Higginbotham, 2023; Taylor et al., 2019). Thus, Black male school

counselors are tasked with navigating social expectations tied not only to their male identity but also to their Black male identity.

Further illustrating these intersections, Moore (2022) conducted a qualitative study to explore the unique experiences Black male school counselors have while being underrepresented in the profession. All 11 participants in Moore's (2022) study referred to wanting to be change agents, through the *call to serve*. They shared a desire to make a positive impact on students, their community (specifically the Black community), and the counseling profession as a whole. 90% of the participants attributed forming positive connections with students specifically as the deciding factor in pursuing school counseling as a career, signifying their commitment to helping children, regardless of the risks. Aware of the stereotypes associated with men who work with children, along with the stereotypes associated with black men being beasts, the participants still chose to pursue school counseling as a career because they valued the work of advocacy.

When asked about what it is like being a Black man in the U.S., the participants generally talked about being a Black man from a place of pride and joy. They used terms like "powerful," "majesty," and "special" when describing how *they* view Black men. Jayden, an early career school counselor, stated, "being a black male is power. It's powerful, it's untamed power" (p. 109). Jayden then goes on to reflect on the negative perceptions the world has about Black men; he said, "But it is also dangerous. I think being a Black male makes you susceptible to a lot of hate, stereotypes, unrealistic expectations. It endangers your very life" (p. 109). Although many of the participants describe being a Black man positively, like Jayden, they also discussed the limitations of being a Black man in society's eyes. Jamison stated, "there are so many barriers that are blocking and hindering us...it's always a navigation process, a way of having sometimes to quiet yourself or limit yourself...like put yourself down so that you can thrive" (p. 108). "I have to be a little smaller than I normally am so that I can make sure that I go home" (p. 109). Jamison's reflection on having to become "small," a common strategy many black people utilize to survive Historically White Institutions, also known as *codeswitching*.

Codeswitching refers to the conscious or unconscious alternation of one's behavior, facial expression, and even style of speaking when navigating cross-racial interactions (Sharma, 2023; McCluney et al., 2019). The function of codeswitching is to debunk stereotypes, biases, and expectations that other races may have about a particular group. The motivation for codeswitching is multifaceted. The individual shapes it *in the context* of the situation they are in. For example, some people may code-switch to advance their career while others may use it as a means for survival by making others feel more comfortable around them (McCluney et al., 2019). Whatever the motivation, codeswitching has social and psychological consequences. For Black people, they may experience social rejection from their community for "acting White (Durkee et al., 2019). The mental labor associated with codeswitching has also been shown to

negatively impact cognitive functioning, thereby negatively affecting work performance (Walton et al., 2015).

Because Black men are socially thought to be *big and scary*, Black male school counselors have to constantly find ways to codeswitch or appear *less frightening* to both their White counterparts *and* their female counterparts simultaneously. This is what W.E.B. Du Bois (2014) refers to as *double consciousness*. Double consciousness is when black people have a hyperawareness of how they view themselves, while at the same time have an awareness of how society sees them, which is often rooted in prejudice. Other participants in Moore's (2022) study reported similar experiences of making themselves "small." Like Jamison, Jayden stated that on the rare occasions when Black men are "welcomed" into a space (i.e., a White space), they had to present themselves in ways that were "digestible to their White counterparts" (p.139). Jayden's reflection was supported by Jamal, who shared his experience as a school counselor and one of the few Black men in his counseling training program. When talking about his experience as a school counselor, Jamal stated, "an issue that I continue to experience even in the professional world is being a Black man and having certain people going back to the stereotypes...if I am passionate about something, it's automatically viewed as aggression" (p.123). Reflecting on his experience in his counseling training program, Jamal also stated, "I had another classmate who was also Black, who had very similar experiences. We had to always make sure we were kind of tempering our reactions or our opinions on things because we didn't want to be viewed as the angry ones" (p.123). This report is reflective of how Black boys often lose their voices learning to advocate for themselves in a society that does not even see them as human (Hackman, 2016). While reflecting on his experience as a Black boy in school, one of the school counselors in Gueh's (2020) study also reveals how his voice was muted, as teachers perceived him as the "angry black kid" when he attempted to speak up for himself (p. 105). This finding was also echoed by Jayden from Moore's (2022) study, who attributed the shared experience of Black men being seen as aggressive as the result of them [White people] "not being used to Black voices," which often results in them feeling intimidated and/or afraid (p. 145). So frequently, Black boys learn early how their voices and their pain can be weaponized against them, which has significant implications for their general well-being in their adult years, like choosing not to disclose their feelings or consider counseling as a coping strategy (Adams, 2019).

In sum, the voices in Moore's (2022) and Gueh's (2020) studies reveal the complexities of being a male school counselor in a woman-dominated profession, and in being a Black male school counselor in a profession dominated by Whiteness. School counselors are on the frontline to handle the emotional distress, racial trauma, and economic disparities students bring into the building each day (Leon, 2023; Niles et al., 2024). They are also navigating conflicting role expectations, which adds a layer of occupational stress (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). In addition, Black male school counselors are also simultaneously navigating a gendered, racialized

community that demonizes Black men in the same breath they are asking for their help (Johnson & Bryan, 2016; Moore, 2022; Robinson-Perez, 2021). The educational profession at large is actively seeking Black men to serve in many roles, including on the frontline as school counselors, perpetuating inaccurate information and stereotypes, while also failing to build *meaningful* supports both nationally and locally. Next, I provide recommendations, grounded in the Ecological Social Justice School Counseling framework.

Recommendations

According to the ASCA position statement on anti-racism (2021), "racism remains a part of society in the United States and exists throughout all of our institutions," including education (p. 1). The school counseling profession was founded in white supremacy; in this Historically White Institution, Black men are being spiritually murdered by being continuously recruited into a profession that has little to no structures in place to support their distinctly unique needs while navigating the profession. According to the ASCA ethical standards, all individuals within the school counseling profession are ethically bound to understand "historic and systemic oppression" and engage in systemic change toward socially just, equitable, and anti-oppressive systems (ASCA, 2022 C.i). Thus, ASCA calls on school counselors to be agents of systemic change, to understand and dismantle racist and oppressive systems. This call is for all those in the field of school counseling, including practitioners, pre-service master's and doctoral students, leaders in school districts and professional organizations, faculty, and associations. As such, ASCA recognizes that change, particularly systemic change, must happen across multiple levels of a system.

Through the Ecological Social Justice School Counseling (ESJSC) theory, scholars (Johnson & Brookover, 2021; Johnson et al., 2022) outlined how school counselors engage in anti-racist practice to propel forward advocacy, social justice, and systemic change. Accordingly, they define anti-racism as "rooted in action and is a process of actively identifying and opposing racism in all forms" (Johnson et al, 2022, p. 185) and "antiracism is the active dismantling of racist policies, procedures, and systems in order to equitably distribute resources and power… [through] understanding of the racist policies and practices that permeate U.S. school systems, and thereby school counseling" (p. 186). The ESJSC theory utilizes an ecological systems lens to examine the inequities embedded in systems, how these impact students, and the urgent need to dismantle and address such inequality and racism. While the ESJSC has primarily been proposed for conceptualizing anti-racism, equity, and social justice of *students*, we extend this theory also to include *school counselors*. Particularly, *Black male school counselors*. As Historically White Institutions and spirit murdering are complex systemic and historic issues, we utilize the ESJC as a social justice-grounded ecological framework to provide a comprehensive approach across multiple levels of the systems impacting Black male school counselors. As such, the school counseling profession has an ethical responsibility to work toward identifying,

reducing, and eliminating the spirit murdering of Black male school counselors in K-12 education.

Actively Identifying a School Counseling History Rooted in White Supremacy

As a first step, the school counseling profession must critically examine and understand its background as a Historically White Institution, and how that manifests today. Historically White Institutions are marked by a pattern of long-standing gendered and racist systems, which have impacted their growth and development. Both the counseling and educational fields must examine covert and overt structures responsible for harming Black male school counselors, including historical beliefs, structures, policies, and practices that have grounded the school counseling profession. How were these developed? Who have they historically and presently harmed and privileged? For instance, not relying on Black male school counselors to be responsible for diversifying the profession and assigning inappropriate roles that put them at odds with the role of the school counselor (i.e., damaging relationships with students/families by perpetuating systemic racism through the policing and disciplining of Black boys and young men).

Reading this article is a first step, as well as further seminal reading (i.e., Brown, 2018; Du Bois, 2014; Lazaridou & Fernando, 2022; Singh, 2019) along with ongoing training and professional development. We urge this increased awareness at all levels of the school counseling profession and throughout society. Armed with this knowledge, we then recommend the need to examine, interrogate, and dismantle inequitable systems.

Acknowledging Gendered Assumptions Around Black Males in School Counseling/Education

The experiences of Black male school counselors are shaped by their experiences of being both Black and male. As we previously mentioned, they navigate the world with what W.E.B. Du Bois refers to as a *double consciousness*, being hyper-aware of how their social identities influence how the world perceives them and consequently treats them. Navigating the complexity of stereotypes and social assumptions assigned to their Blackness and maleness is mentally and psychologically taxing. Thus, their unique needs require imagination to create supports that don't yet exist in the profession at large. As a result, we recommend creating formal guidelines to support the nuanced and intersectional nature of Black men working in the role of school counselor. Black male school counselors would greatly benefit from formal procedures and/or recommendations on how to navigate student interactions based on gendered and racialized social assumptions surrounding Black men working with students. We also recommend that these formal guidelines be co-constructed with Black male school counselors to include their voices and unique experiences navigating the profession as men working with children in the school counseling role.

Purposefully Centering Black Male Strengths, Cultural Wealth and Joy

Building on Love's (2016) messaging, stakeholders can combat gendered racism by purposefully affirming, nurturing, centering, and celebrating the cultural assets, pride, and joy of Black males within society, particularly within K-12 schools. An example of this could include purposely and publicly celebrating the work Black male school counselors are doing every day across various levels, whether they be practitioners, pre-service professionals, researchers, or counselor educators. Despite the low numbers of Black men in the profession, they are present at every level, and the groundbreaking work they are doing is not publicized or celebrated enough. Part of this intentional work positively centering Black males in K-12 education means re-writing the deficit-laden narrative that is inappropriately perpetuated societally, pertaining to gender stereotypes and their work with youth in schools. Following the lead of Moore et al. (2021), we can showcase the contributions of Black male school counselors intentionally and more frequently.

Recruitment and Retention

ASCA's ethical code for school counselor educators and preparation programs (2024) emphasizes that the profession "commit to recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty and student body" (C.5). Similarly, *if* Black men are going to be continuously recruited to support the needs of schools and students, role-appropriate or not, organizations are going to have to "stop playing and be intentional" (Moore, 2022, p.138). If organizations want to overcome the retention barrier, the same logic applies (Grooms et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2011). Acknowledging and addressing the unique positioning and perspectives of Black male school counselors is pivotal to the goal of retention.

Black male school counselors from both Moore's (2022) and Gueh's (2020) studies spoke about the criticalness of *intentionality* when recruiting and retaining Black male school counselors as well as supporting their unique needs. In Moore's study Jayden stated, "To retain anybody, we have to *want to* recognize black males in this role, *in the context* that they are in this role" and "You can't recruit and retain no damn body if you don't understand their experience, in this context." (p.138-139). One of the Black male school counselors for Gueh's study recommended work being done simultaneously at the local and national levels. As such, we suggest partnering with local groups that are already doing this work, like the Black Male School Counselors Alliance (2024), to expand their efforts. The Black Male School Counselors Alliance is a group created by Black male school counselors across levels, and their goal is to recruit, mentor, and retain Black males in the school counseling profession. Locally, their reach stretches across metro Atlanta, but with the support and resources from the profession at large, their impact could be global.

In addition to schools and districts, recruitment and retention are salient issues in school counseling graduate programs. Black students in multiple studies have reported negative

experiences in their training programs related to microaggressions from both peers *and* faculty. Specifically, they have reported their multicultural and diversity classes being lackluster, and that they are often burdened with combating racial stereotypes while attending class, just to name a few (Haskins et al., 2013; Paone et al., 2019; Seward & Guiffrida, 2012). Dayton, a Black male school counselor in Moore's (2022) study, shared feeling isolated and misunderstood by his peers while in his counseling program, an experience shared by other Black males in counseling programs. He reported that although the faculty were supportive, interactions with his cohort members were a source of stress for him. Although counselor educators cannot wholly control these interactions or the experiences that Black students have because of them, they should continue to make *intentional* efforts to create inclusive spaces that allow for diverse perspectives. According to McGuffey (as cited by Longworth, 2020), "white privilege is your history being taught as the core curriculum, while mine is being offered as an elective." With that, we recommend intentionally infusing literature, media, and perspectives from people who have historically marginalized identities in pre-service preparation program content as a core requirement, rather than optional or supplemental material.

Intentional Community Building

The ASCA State of the Profession Report (2021b) shows that of the 75,000 school counselors who were surveyed, 77% self-identified as White compared to 10% Black. 87% were women compared to 11% men. This data reflects the substantially low percentage of Black male school counselors. Further, based on the intersections of their maleness and their Blackness, Black male school counselors have explicitly voiced feeling "isolated, frustrated, and overwhelmed" when describing their experiences of being Black male school counselors (Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022). They communicated extensively about feelings of isolation and loneliness. Next, those in Moore's study discussed strategies that supported them in navigating their roles as Black male school counselors; reportedly, having designated spaces to process their experiences was essential to their *survival* in the profession.

As a result, we recommend purposefully promoting community and developing ways of connecting Black male school counselors to each other, creating national and local networking opportunities, both in person and virtually, to foster connection and community among Black male school counselors. At the national level, while ASCA has several affinity groups (i.e., BIPOC School Counselors and LGBTQ+ School Counselors), due to their unique needs, we recommend extending this specifically for Black males in school counseling, inviting practitioners, pre-service graduate students, and doctoral students, as well as school counselor educators. As part of this affinity group, ASCA can create and maintain a central database where Black male school counselors can self-select involvement. We also recommend that this affinity group provide ongoing feedback to ASCA, to monitor outcomes and make additional recommendations.

Next, we suggest that professional leaders, such as district leaders and counselor educators, leverage their professional networks to connect Black male school counselors to those who could potentially serve as mentors and supervisors. Isolation was a common feeling among Black male school counselors in all the studies. Many of them reported being the only one in the building, while others reported being the only one in their whole district. Supervision was also something Black male school counselors mentioned was helpful for them both professionally and personally while navigating the isolation (Chavis, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022). The Black male colleagues being connected should not be *expected* to serve in these roles, but rather make connections and decide accordingly. The experiences of Black male school counselors are uniquely different from those of non-Black male school counselors and female school counselors alike; thus, their supervision and mentorship needs are distinctly different. Helping connect Black male school counseling students with Black male school counselors across various roles (i.e., practitioners, faculty, researchers) provides support for both their mental health and professional development as they become leaders and practitioners in the profession.

Scholarship and Resources

As expert researchers in the profession, counselor educators are the creators of literature and knowledge that informs both the school counseling policies that govern and the practices that are implemented. We recommend that counselor educators build a library of literature that not only explores the intersectional experiences of Black male school counselors but also centers the voices and efforts of Black male school counselors as researchers, leading scholarship. Far too often, literature about marginalized groups is created by those who do not belong to those groups, resulting in exploitation and misrepresentation. The impact of this is that it immortalizes stereotypes and misguided ideas that perpetuate deficit narratives. For Black boys, they are forever seen as broken things without agency that need to be fixed or saved. For Black men, they are forever seen as frightening creatures whose only purpose in educational settings is to police Black and Brown boys.

At this point, scholars have cited the gross lack of research addressing Black male school counselors (Chavis, 2024; Davis et al., 2022; Gueh, 2020; Moore, 2022). As a result, there remains a need to expand the research base that explores these intersecting identities, as well as others like gender identity and sexuality, and ability status, to name a few.

Building on an extended scholarship base, school counseling scholars and associations can share the unique experiences and assets of Black male school counselors through research briefs, webinars, conference sessions, and revisions to related position statements and other key documents. For instance, while the ASCA ethical standards (2022) emphasize the importance of systemic change and social justice in supporting the diverse cultures of *students and families*, to our knowledge, there is a need to also explicitly state supporting the diverse cultures of *school*

counselors (practitioners, school counselor educators, etc.). ASCA's ethical code and position statements for anti-racism and cultural diversity should also be modified to demonstrate support for diversifying school counselors, including Black male school counselors.

Conclusion

In this article, we aim to increase awareness that leads to the interrogation and dismantling of racist and gendered Historically White Institutions that perpetuate the spirit murdering of Black male school counselors and instead center the beauty of Black strengths, culture, and joy. We are calling on the school counseling profession to combat the systems of oppression that have grounded not only school counseling, but K-12 education and our greater U.S. society. Overcoming a history steeped in white supremacy requires collaboration *with* Black male school counselors, along with *intentional effort* from all levels of the system. As change agents, all of us are governed by a code of ethics that prioritizes social justice; as such, we recognize systemic change as the core of our work as school counselors. This commitment to a code of ethics steeped in social justice and systemic change is one of the distinctions that separates us from "guidance counselors." We must model the very things we expect of pre-service school counselors, as they prepared to lead this work. At this very moment, the U.S. Department of Education is being dismantled, and anti-DEI legislation is being implemented nationwide. We do not have the luxury of time, and none of this can wait. Many of us are ready and have been prepared…let's get started.

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*in the school counseling profession. The vision of the Black Male School Counselors Alliance (BMSCA) is to build a global network of BMSCs that would attract, inspire and impact current and future generations. We believe the presence and unique skills of Black male school counselors is a catalyst to transform the educational community. Follow us on this journey to increase the number of qualified, creative, and impactful Black males in the school counseling profession. Our Motto "Lifting as We Climb", reminds us that it is our responsibility to dismantle systemic barriers and bring the next generation of Black males into the school counseling community.*Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C4E536wOjsw/?igsh=MXRmY3Jhc2N6MWo0eQ==

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Finding Wholeness: From Latina Daughter to Motherscholar: A Mujerista Autoethnography

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Abstract

School counseling is facing a crisis of representation. Within the diversification of the profession, the question of professional identity development is critical. However, the professional identity development of school counselors from an intersectional and Mujerista perspective is limited. Through an evocative autoethnographic methodology, I explored my professional identity development through the recall of various critical incidents that impacted the way I exist and enact social justice advocacy to increase the narrative representation of a different path of professional identity development and to support professional diversification efforts. Themes from Latine professional identity development, Mujerista psychology, and motherscholar epistemology were used to deductively code the recalled critical incidents. Readers are invited to feel instead of think through the moral dilemmas of professional diversification efforts and then connect that dilemma to a diversification action within school counseling practice, education, research, and policy.

Introduction

Diversification efforts are top priority for various professions, including nursing, STEM, medicine, and school counselor education (Grimes Stanfill et al., 2019; Luebbe & Ogbaselase, 2018; Wilson et al., 2018). In previous years, there was an increase in federal career pipeline grants specific to diversifying these various professions (i.e. Minority Fellowship Programs; Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program; The Holmes Scholars Program). However, since the onset of the current legislative landscape, many of these grant programs have been defunded or under attack. The legislative attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion has resulted in more 2,600 jobs being eliminated since 2023 (Martinez, 2025). Although there is clear defunding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, the diversification of professions remains of critical importance and the question of professional identity development an essential piece in the conversation. Professional identity development (PID) for school counselors has been well-studied in the last 10 years (Gibson, et al., 2023; Heled et. al., 2022; Mecadon-Mann & Tuttle, 2023). However, the PID of school counselors from an intersectional and Mujerista perspective is limited. Yet, we expect the profession to diversify without considering the “Crisis of Representation” within the academy (Ellis, 2011). Without this type of exploration, how are future Latine or other Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) school counselors ever going to see themselves within the interwoven consolation that is personal and professional identity within the sociopolitical structure of White supremacy culture?

Hipolito et al. (2021) delineated two approaches for supporting diversification efforts, this manuscript centers the trickle-down approach by centering the PID of one school counselor

educator to provide representation for professional school counselors considering doctoral programs. Through this intention, school counselors are equipped with an alternative narrative to a pathway and development in becoming a systems change agent, on a larger macro-level. In this manuscript, I seek to explore my own experience making meaning of my professional and personal identities, finding integrity to self and belonging within systems of oppression aimed at upholding the White dominant culture and distantly severing the persona from the profession. Through an evocative autoethnographic methodology, I explored my PID through the recall of various critical incidents that have impacted the way I exist and enact social justice advocacy to increase the narrative representation of a different path of PID and to support professional diversification efforts.

Theoretical Framework

Several models of racial identity development exist across the social science literature (i.e. nigrescence [Cross & Vandiver, 2001]; White racial identity development, [Helms, 1993]). However, no model explores the intricacies of intersectional identity development at the intersections of Latina, school counselor educator, and mother. Therefore, I borrowed from counseling Latine PID (Flores Locke, 2022), Mujerista psychologies (Bryant-Davis & Comas Díaz, 2016), and motherscholar epistemologies (Gumbs et al., 2016) to seek meaning and understanding of my lived experience.

Professional identity development (PID) in theory, is a process of acculturation whereby the counselor integrates their personal and professional identities. PID has been sufficiently explored within counseling literature for both master's and doctoral students (Ewe & Ng, 2024; Gibson et al., 2023; Mecadon-Mann & Tuttle, 2023; Woo et al., 2022). However, current models emphasize values of White ethnic identity, such as individualism and internal locus of control, and are based on self-perceived merit (Flores Locke, 2022), enforcing a process of assimilation for students of the global majorities. Flores Locke (2022) sought to disrupt this narrative by exploring eight Latinx doctoral students' experiences of navigating PID within predominantly White institutions (PWI). Their findings highlighted the importance of Latinx doctoral students' racial-ethnic identity compared to their peers and faculty. PID was a racialized experience among the participants. Their racialized experiences highlighted a counterstory that centered on the experience of being one of the few, making their own space, finding their voice, reclaiming power, and disrupting the norm. The results of this study align with my own experience of PID as a doctoral student and later as a tenure-track faculty.

I first sought to engage in my continued PID by exploring Womenist literature (i.e. Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Alice Walker). Although much of it resonates with my own experience, Womenism is a theory of thought based in the Black Femme experience, not the Latine Femme experience. It wasn't until reading Mojica Rodriguez (2021) that I discovered a theory that resonated with my

Latinidad. Through her writings, Mojica Rodriguez introduced me to Mujerista theology which later branched out to become Mujerista psychology.

Mujerista and Womenist psychologies are similar in that "they have similar priorities and overlapping focus areas; they face comparable intersections of oppression while having a history of adopting cultural strengths to navigate and resist those oppressive forces" (p. 5) and value collaboration and sisterhood (Bryant-Davis & Comas Díaz, 2016). Mujerismo grew out of the Womenist movement as a Latina womanism. It asserts four central tasks; critical awareness, self-definition/determination, liberation, and self-empowerment, as necessary tasks towards wholeness. The pillars and values of Mujerismo have been unknowingly integrated into the fiber of my being throughout my entire life over several generations. However, the academic language that affirmed my experience, values, and beliefs only became accessible to me behind the strong guarded, gatekept walls of academic libraries.

Both womanist and mujerista readings have been my form of self-empowerment as my experience of mothering and becoming a school counselor educator intersected nearly simultaneously. Revolutionary Mothering (Gumbs et al., 2016) defines mothering as a creative spirit, an action-oriented way of existing, rather than as a static identity marker. From this creative spirit the epistemology of motherscholaring emerged. It is a theory of love, at the intersection of the personal and professional, it is a soul work that seeks to bring wholeness and integration rather than compartmentalization (Howard et al., 2023). Motherscholaring redefines professionalism in a way that invites all parts of ourselves in the soul work of teaching, scholarship, and service for a larger collective liberatory purpose. In combination, PID, mujerismo, and motherscholaring retroactively affirmed my racialized experience within the walls of academia. They have affirmed my experience navigating the borderlands of being part of academia, yet a complete outsider (Anzaldua, 2022). Finally, they add to a thicker, more nuanced and empowering understanding of my experiences, bringing attention and awareness to a counterstory of PID.

Representation throughout professional school counseling, from practitioner to school counselor educator, is an ongoing professional priority. However, there needs to be more discussion around the absence of the representation of diverse experiences and journeys toward school counselor education. This begs the question, "if no one is writing about my experience, does it even exist; is it even welcome?" School counselor education is entrenched in Whiteness and Eurocentric values of worshiping the written word (Bayne et al., 2023; Simmons et al., 2024). However, if diverse experiences are not written in the spaces holding social capital (i.e., peer reviewed journal articles), then the diversification efforts of the profession remain hopeless. Therefore, to highlight one diverse experience of PID, I utilized an autoethnographic methodology to answer the research question "What is the professional identity journey of a Mujerista school counselor educator motherscholar?".

Methodology

Autoethnography is a research methodology that has been utilized since the 1970's. It became popular within anthropology and despite its use throughout social sciences and communication, has only recently begun to emerge within counseling literature (Cox, 2024). The goal of an autoethnography is to use the researcher's personal lived experiences to help the reader feel instead of think through the moral dilemmas of our society and then connect that dilemma to a larger group of people (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography seeks to make the personal political by increasing critical awareness through the sharing of lived experiences, disrupting the status quo, and probing questions of identity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It seeks to engage the reader in reconceptualizing the work personally, professionally, and politically. It is a pedagogy of hope and joy while honoring pain and suffering (Spry, 2018). It is not about the individual construction of identity and reflexivity but rather a collective reflective process of the relational collective. They take on various forms and do not have universally agreed-upon procedures. Rather, autoethnography is more of an umbrella methodology encompassing a wide variety of types of autoethnography that all borrow from multiple other qualitative research methods. Within counseling literature, self-studies have begun to emerge; however, the self-studies that have been published are more of a collective process that mirrors the mandated self-studies of the professions accrediting body, the Council for Accreditation in Counselor Education and Related Programs (Ieva et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021). To date, there are no published autoethnographies within school counseling literature.

Positionality

It seems odd to have a section specific to positionality when positionality aims to bring awareness to the subjective understanding of the researcher. Within autoethnography methodology, I am both the researcher and the sole-participant. Autoethnography stands on the premise that all truth, memory, recollection, and observation is subjective (Ellis, 2011). Bias is inherent in research, whether knowingly or unknowingly, and the autoethnographer accepts this as part of the process of knowing. Therefore, through an autoethnographic perspective, this entire manuscript, my entire story, is part of my ever-evolving positionality. I hold certain identities, and some are more salient than others at any given moment. For example, I am the youngest child, the only daughter with two older brothers raised in a Puerto Rican household by parents who are members of the Puerto Rican diaspora of the1970/80's. I learned to speak Spanish before I entered public education and learned English as a second language. I was raised in a largely second-generation immigrant community in Miami, FL, where Spanish was spoken more often than English. My Spanish was never the refined academic Spanish of academics. Instead, it is a conglomeration of Puerto Rican Spanglish paired with the influences of other Caribbean and South American Spanish-speaking countries. Language has framed a large part of my worldview or at least a necessity for flexibility in linguistic communication. I list some primary identities that were explored early in my life within the sociopolitical context of

Miami, FL, in the 90s. However, this autoethnography explores a different sociopolitical context. One of my PID as a school counselor, trained at a Hispanic-Serving institution, practiced within a multilingual, multiethnic, international context, then selectively displaced at a PWI, where the hard questions of racial identity development were unavoidable to the stark contrast of American Whiteness around me.

Data Collection

Various methods of data collection are considered appropriate in autoethnographies (Ellis, 2011). After receiving IRB approval, for this manuscript, three sources of data were collected to ensure data triangulation; (1) personal retroactive memory recall, (2) reviewing personal journal entries from my doctoral program, were the primary sources of data collection. The recalled data was collected for the time period 2018 – 2023, which is inclusive of my entire doctoral program and the first three years of being on the tenure-track. Additionally, I engaged in (3) memory recall discussions with family members and peers who could fill gaps in my memory recall. I share some of their perceptions and the collective impact of marginalization through the sharing of autoethnographic exploration. To collect data through personal and family/peer memory recall, I created a table that contextualized my critical incidents within the sociopolitical context of world/US events and personal life events, as suggested by various autoethnographic exemplars (Cox, 2024; McCoy, 2018). Critical incidents were chosen if they appeared more than once across all three data sources, for instance, if a memory emerged in my personal journal as well as my personal memory recall, that memory was then added to critical incidents for further data analysis. Table 1 shows an example of the above-described data collection process. Only data from the critical incidents column was analyzed.

Trustworthiness

The empirical rigor of autoethnography has been one of the reasons for its slow adoption into various social sciences. Various advocates for using this methodology have provided guidance on how to increase the validity and rigor of the methodology (Hays & McKibben, 2021). I employed data and theory triangulation, by utilizing three external content experts in this study. Two content experts were Latine femmes within the academy and school counselor educators. The third content expert was a Latine queer femme, Mujerista elder, and mother who is outside of the academy. All three content experts engage in personal and collective liberatory soulwork in similar ways, as I do. I consulted with the content experts at three points during the research process. First, they were consulted to provide feedback on the coding and theoretical framework, which was used to deductively code the critical incidents (Creswell & Poth 2025; Hays & McKibben, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). During the first consultation meeting, we discussed the theories and the codebook, edits were made to the codebook based on expert feedback. When I initially designed the coding framework, I sensed that Latine PID and Mujerista Pillars could be easily aligned because of their similarities. However, I quieted that idea until all three of my content experts noted the same possibility. I did not address this sense of alignment with my

content experts, however, each one spontaneously and organically noted how the theories aligned. Afterwards, the theme alignment was decided on by consensus with the content experts as follows: Being One of the Few (Mujerista pillar: critical awareness), Making My Own Space (Mujerista pillar: self-determination/definition), Finding My Voice (Mujerista Pillar: liberation), Reclaiming My Power (Mujerista Pillar; self-empowerment), Disrupting the Norm. They were consulted again after the initial coding of the critical incidents to provide feedback and consensus coding (Saldaña, 2021). There were several codes that I was unsure of their fit within our coding framework. For example, I originally had "Ready to quit PhD, mother and aunt would not allow it", coded under the theme, making my own space however, after discussion with the content experts, we agreed that it better aligned with "disrupting the norm" since the unspoken expectation is for BIPOC students to quit. Finally, they were sent this manuscript's results and discussion sections to provide critical feedback. Adjustments were made to the data analysis process based on feedback.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through an iterative reflexive process over two months. This autoethnography is personal and intimate, so an iterative process was necessary. Analyzing my experiences required a cycle of intentionality, time, and space to reach a deep level of reflexivity. The content experts read, processed, and reflected on the data collected. They inquired and asked critical questions to ignite more profound reflexivity. From these discussions and platicas, I critically analyzed how my experience aligned with the themes of Latinx Counselor Educator PID, the primary pillars of Mujerista psychology, and finally motherscholar epistemologies. A deductive coding process was employed to analyze my critical incidents (Hays & McKibben, 2021). After coding through Latinx PID and Mujerista Psychology pillars, I then explored how my emerging motherscholar identity impacted my PID, during specific critical incidents.

Results

The PID of Latine school counselor educators differs from the PID of other racial/ethnic identities. Namely, Flores Locke (2022), uncovered specific themes that differed from the larger PID narrative of counselor educators. For data analysis, those themes aligned with Mujerista psychology's pillars due to their similarities and parallels. The themes used in the deductive coding process were (1) Being One of the Few (Mujerista pillar: critical awareness), (2) Making My Own Space (Mujerista pillar: self-determination/definition), (3) Finding My Voice (Mujerista Pillar: liberation), (4) Reclaiming My Power (Mujerista Pillar; self-empowerment), (5) Disrupting the Norm. I discuss specific critical incidents of each theme that had an impact on my professional identity.

Being One of the Few (Critical Awareness)

According to Flores Locke (2022), being one of the few was characterized by an experience of being isolated and misunderstood. It was further explored through an increased awareness of the participant's racial/ethnic identity along with other lines of oppressive experiences such as linguistic or gender oppression. The essential task of critical awareness within Mujerista psychology parallels the experience of being one of the few. In fact, my experiences of being one of the few, across multiple identities, including one of the few school counselors, are what contributed to an increased critical awareness of my sociopolitical context and experiences of oppression within the academy.

Very early on in my doctoral program, I felt the jarring reality of being one of the few, in fact, the only Latina and one of a few students of color, and school counselors. I recall a time after one of my first classes, my first semester, when a white-male-identifying peer and I were talking and connecting, walking through campus, telling stories of my family and where I come from. In my stories, I would often share my parents' professions (nurse and minister). In this share, my peer said to me, "Oh wait, you're not a first-gen?" I remember being completely shocked by this realization of his and his own shock that I was not a first-generation student. It was in this instance that I realized that this peer, and possibly other people with racial and gender privilege, may have a narrative about my life that is written and defined well before I ever speak. That narrative includes an expectation that I am defying all odds by gaining educational access because no one has done it before me.

For instance, I started my doctoral program after Hurricane Maria devasted Puerto Rico, my homeland, and amid regular and active earthquake activity on the island. There was little discussion around me about the impacts of the U.S. government response or lack thereof during the aftermath of these compounding disasters. Yet, I was having regular conversations with family members on the island of what supports and resources were needed and how to strategize to get those resources to them. I had regular conversations with school counseling colleagues in Florida on what they were seeing in the students who were climate refugees and how I, as a school counselor educator student, could support them. It was during this season, that I was becoming increasingly aware of Puerto Rico's colonial status as a US territory and although Puerto Ricans are born with US citizenship, they are treated as second-class citizens and receive remnants of aid with all the criticism of dehumanization.

Experiencing dehumanization was and continues to be an on-going theme of my critical awareness and experience of being one of the few. After an incredibly difficult first semester on the tenure-track, I reviewed my student feedback. I found that one student felt entitled to dehumanize me within their course evaluations. This student credited me with "destroying this program" while other students shared that "she has an attitude for no reason" while yet another commented on how my "expectations, policies, and demeanor are incredibly

misaligned with [their] experience of this program". These highly charged comments sent me a clear message that I was one of the first and only faculty of color in that program, and my goal of increasing students' critical awareness was not welcomed.

My experience of being one of the few and critical awareness expanded beyond my identity as a young-female Latina into my emerging mothering identity. I became a mother in the biological sense soon after starting the tenure-track job and announced that I was expecting a daughter during my second semester. I did not anticipate the awkwardness and isolation I would experience with my changing body, limited mobility, walking with a cane, and developing identity as a mother within the academy. I had such a hard time understanding how I can be surrounded by so many woman scholars yet feel a sense of avoidance, and complete ignoring of the impacts of this major life transition in my professional world. I got a clear message that pregnancy was not something that was to be discussed or celebrated within the academy. This distinction became clear to me when my spouse, a White-male who worked within community mental health at the time was given a beautiful celebration with his co-workers to celebrate this significant life transition that included a small cake, a card, and a few small gifts, while I did not receive any collective acknowledgment in my workplace, rather, was sent a gift to my house, after the semester had ended with no card. Through this experience, I learned that my mothering identity was going to bring me another experience of critical awareness of being one of the few, particularly in my desire for wholeness of identity, not fragmented identities.

Making Space (Self-Determination/Definition)

Making space and self-definition/determination were aligned during the external auditing process because of their overlapping characterizations. Flores Locke (2022) described making space as Latinx doctoral students' ability to find ways of persisting within predominantly white academic spaces despite their experiences of isolation and marginalization. Similarly, within Mujerista psychology, self-definition, often referred to interchangeably as self-determination, is described as the survival, healing, and resistance strategies of Latine's seeking wholeness of mind, body, spirit, and collective (Bryant-Davis & Comas Diaz, 2016).

The earliest memory of making my space and self-definition was prompted by my mother. Shortly after I moved to attend my doctoral program, I quickly realized how little the graduate assistantship pay was, and how it would not support my basic living needs. I remember feeling a deep sense of needing to financially support myself because that is what all my other peers were doing. I would regularly hear peers talking, borderline gloating, about how difficult they had it having to support themselves. I believed this was the way I was supposed to be a doctoral student. I quickly found myself two additional jobs outside of my graduate assistantship, one that I worked from 4am-8am at $10/hour and the other I would work from 9am-12pm for $15/hour. After my morning shifts, I would go to class and then finish off the day with work for my assistantship. I did this for about six months and I was exhausted, spent, tired, and not well.

I remember sitting on the floor in my kitchen, talking to my mom about how worried I was about not being able to meet my basic needs, despite working three jobs that all paid below a living wage. My mom listened empathetically and asked me several clarifying questions. It was clear she was trying to understand my context and my needs. Soon after the picture became clear to her, she said to me "Ay, Lily, we are not that broke, deja dos de esos trabajos!". A sense of relief washed over me. Although I had been raised my whole life to lean into collective community, at this PWI, I resisted my own cultural wisdom. My mother reminded me that there was another way, a collective way that had no shame or guilt attached to it. I accepted my collectives support that day. My mom supported me in finding a way to resist the oppressive impact of rugged individualism, by leaning into community and defining how I would get through my doctoral program in a way that aligned with my Latinidad.

Creating and birthing human life was another critical incident that highly impacted my unapologetic confidence in creating my own space and self-determination. When I started my tenure-track position. I understood that the norm of the program was that each faculty teach two night sections. This was not an issue for me prior to my mothering journey. I didn't even know if it would be an issue when I began my mothering journey. The semester I returned from parental leave, I taught two night classes as was the norm and silent expectation. That semester of work was by far my most challenging semester of the first three years on the tenure-track. My family started the semester without access to childcare, and with no family around to provide in-person physical support as I returned to work. My partner and I initially thought that my teaching two night classes might work out because we would be working the opposite schedules, making room for me to care for our daughter during the day, switch with my spouse, and go teach at night. On paper, it seemed like an ideal situation. My colleagues even talked about what an ideal situation we were in with us being on opposite schedules. However, we learned very quickly that it was far from ideal! The tenure-track job is much more than simply teaching for a specific number of hours a week. It requires immense prep, student support time, grading, endless meetings, and never-ending expectations of self-sacrifice. Expectations that were not present in my experience as a school counselor. In fact, school counseling had much clearer boundaries. I found myself working within this "machine" (Berbary et al., 2023). I was struggling with low breastmilk supply, a strict pumping schedule to maintain my milk supply, a postpartum anxiety diagnosis, and our 7-month-old ebbing and flowing through fussy phases, sleep regressions, and the major change of going to sleep without chestfeeding or even proximity to her primary source of comfort. I would regularly get home around 9 pm, with my spouse babywearing our daughter, while he would be trying to ensure I had a meal ready for me to eat. I remember their faces, both, looking at me the moment I walked in the door saying with their eyes "Please help, we need each other, we need you". It broke my heart every night. I didn't feel an internal sense of failure, rather I became aware that this work schedule was not feasible for the well-being of our collective family. So, I made my space. My spouse and I decided how we would resist the self-sacrificing expectations of academia, and that was, what

seemed a simple request, to not teach two-night classes after that semester. We knew our ideal was that I would not teach any night classes, however, due to the context of the program, we knew that was likely not possible, and compromised to teach one-night class each semester going forward. When I presented this boundary to colleagues, I was met with phrases such as "sometimes you don't get what you want," "that's just the way we do it here to keep it fair," or "everyone has to do it eventually." These comments were completely dismissive of my reality and referred to my boundary as more of a request or a high-maintenance demand. Yet, I was communicating a very real boundary, not out of defiance, but rather out of a way to find my wholeness as a Latina school counselor educator, motherscholar, and spouse. My family and I were not going to find a way to make our family fit the oppressive structure of the self-sacrificial machine, but rather we were going to define how we would survive, thrive, and seek wholeness as part of this structure.

Finding My Voice (Liberation)

Finding my voice and liberation was also a process that fully involved a beautiful collective community. Finding my voice as part of Latinx PID and liberation within Mujerista psychology both entail figuring out who you are within your current context and as hooks (1990) describes finding a homeplace as a political refuge for self and the collective. A large portion of this process for me involved engaging with the literature of Womanist and Mujerista revolutionaries. For instance, after starting to volunteer at the local Latine resource center in the town where I was working on my doctorate, I was introduced to the work of Juana Bordas. Specifically, around her leadership theory being integrated with 10 core values of Latinidad. I remember after reading her work "The power of Latino leadership" (2023) thinking to myself, "wow, I am such a badass, my own culture has set me up to be an incredible leader for collective liberation". Later, my personal therapist introduced me to Gumbs' (2016) collection of essays, "Revolutionary Mothering," and I got to see how mothering was a creative, collective, and political process that was much more complexly defined than the physiological act of birthing. From there, I was introduced to the epistemology of motherscholaring, a movement seeking to find wholeness within the academy and being led by women of color. Most recently, I was introduced to Mujerista theology and later psychology and found language for how my identities have a place within the liberation movement. My path to these radical femmes was paved by a handful of Mujeristas and motherscholars who have been on the journey of this soul work before me. However, these theories and ways of knowing were gatekept behind the walls of elite academic libraries and not common ways of knowing for the non-academic (Mojica Rodriguez, 2021). This growing sense of liberation was apparent in several of my archived journal entries. For instance, on August 18, 2019, a few days before the beginning of my second year as a doctoral student, I wrote "I have really learned to love and appreciate all that I am, my culture, my heart, everything. I am very proud of the person I am today". There was a clear change in trajectory, an acceptance of my own voice, wholeness, and unequivocal value. Later in January 2022, three months pregnant with my first daughter, I signed my journal entry "With

all my love and power". One content expert noted the way liberation was evident in the word choice of my signature, where love comes first, then power, and it is a process of togetherness rather than power over.

Reclaiming My Power (Self-Empowerment)

Reclaiming my power and self-empowerment are Latine PID's and Mujerista psychology's action-oriented pillars. They describe the experience of being silenced, invalidated, or invisible and moving into action to resist those experiences of oppression. Although they sound individualistic with the words "my" and "self," they both include a larger collective of people. They are about making space, not only for self but for others of similar identities. Within my experience of reclaiming my power and self-empowerment, I sometimes experienced this through my own actions, and at other times, I experienced it through others sharing their wisdom, voice, and power with me.

My experience as a fellow of the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) – Minority Fellowship Program, played an instrumental role in my reclaiming and self-empowerment. For instance, I attended the NBCC Symposium the summer of 2019. This conference was only the second or third conference I had ever attended in my life. The previous conferences I had attended felt misaligned, I felt out of place, and completely out of my element. The conferences were stoic and entirely depersonalized. There was an apparent dissociation between the personal and the professional in the environment and social exchanges. However, while at the NBCC symposium, I experienced something entirely different! There was an entire group of people within counseling that embraced wholeness, authenticity, and collective liberation. Through my experience as an NBCC fellow and later through my experience as a Professional School Counseling Emerging Scholar during my early tenure years, I connected with like-minded peers who were also newly on their academic journeys and found a space where my thoughts and ideas were not jarring or radical, but were deeply known and embraced. Out of those experiences, I have continued to engage with NBCC as a mentor for other Latine masters and doctoral students (NBCC, 2024). As a mentor, I try to embody wholeness, center collective liberation, and have continually worked to demystify the whiteness of counseling and academia. These experiences have been incredibly beneficial to my own development and a way of embracing my cultural identities.

Other people have spoken directly into my development of self-empowerment and reclamation of my power. For instance, I have regularly received affirmations from allies, coconspirators, and family members never to allow myself to be silenced. For example, during an incredibly difficult year of complex interpersonal dynamics within my program, my brother, who has no framework for understanding the micropolitics of the academic machine (Berbary et al., 2023) sent me an email saying "I get the sense that this is a battle of the soul and don't ever lose your soul or trade it for a compromise! Ever!! This world has too much of that and you are capable of

breaking past barriers that others can't even see. Love conquers all, so don't let this world dim your light as it's designed to do!". Similarly, when recounting my struggles with the academic structure, my mother shared an old proverb with me: "No arrojes perlas a los cerdos," meaning to preserve and protect my energy. Regardless of their proximity and relationship to academia, both my mother and my eldest brother knew within their soul that what I was struggling with was oppressive and trying to invalidate and silence me. They chose to intentionally share their wisdom and energy to uplift me, empower me, and guide me to reclaim my own sense of power.

Disrupting The Norm

Disrupting the norm is another action-oriented, proactive theme of Latine PID (Flores Locke, 2022). It is about looking for ways to bring change, ways to defy the status quo, and to live within authentic wholeness, regardless of unspoken norms and systems of power. The mere fact that I graduated from my doctoral program disrupted the norm and the narrative others have written for me. Although White supremacist culture would grant that award to the success of an individual person, my graduating happened because of a deep collective that held me through. On August 24, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I wrote in my personal journal, "I want to quit but I know I won't." This knowledge had nothing to do with my own personal strength but rather the commitment of my family to carry me through. The degree was a collective accomplishment powered by collective investment. One of my content experts noted a radical nature to lean into the collective and generational wisdom, resilience, and fight. The 'Si Se Puede' spirit of my people is about a collective poder and not an individual poder (Bordas, 2023).

Another clear example of disrupting the norm was my approach to navigating the interpersonal conflicts that arose during my first three years on the tenure track. There were several convergence points during that experience where I explicitly chose to speak my piece, regardless of the unspoken social ramifications, but rather with a commitment to transformation and growth. It was fascinating to see how others interpreted my truth as a lack of collegiality, and a lack of commitment to a mission or vision. In fact, one content expert reflected on how my investment in disrupting the norm was driven by my commitment to continued growth and the betterment of the collective, rather than out of fear. However, the tenure process is often described as a process of academic hazing, and silencing to gain the approval of your more senior peers and invited into the world of tenured unrestrained influence (Berbary et al., 2024; Kelsky, 2015). It was common for me to hear phrases such as "Wait until you get tenure to do that project", or "I am trying to get tenure, so I won't say anything". This type of rhetoric is a rhetoric based in fear. This study, in and of itself, disrupts the norm. My experience was meant to be silenced, isolated, and not shared publicly, let alone in an academic peer-reviewed manuscript. However, my choices were not based on fear but rather a deep commitment to personal and collective liberation.

Motherscholar Identity Development

My identity as a mother was one identity I struggled to see fit firmly within the themes and pillars of Latine PID or Mujerista psychology. My identity as a motherscholar is my newest identity, one that is emerging and developing. My mothering experience was sprinkled through some of the other themes and pillars, and still a few other critical incidents seemed to only fit within the motherscholar epistemology; an epistemology of love, wholeness, and integration of the personal and professional. For example, one memory of my early mothering journey with my first-born sticks out to me. It was my first semester back from parental leave, my family had not secured child-care since we lived in a child-care desert. My spouse had a scheduling conflict and could not watch our daughter while I taught. Therefore, we made the choice that I would take our nine-month-old daughter to class, I would wear her in a baby carrier and teach simultaneously. There was an unforgettable moment of pure integration and wholeness when my daughter started to fuss in the carrier, I knew what needed to be done in order to meet her needs, so, I started to chestfeed her, all while teaching the module in the Cross-Cultural counseling class on sexism and genderism. That moment felt revolutionary, it felt like motherscholaring at its core.

Another development in my mothering identity is specific to the evolution of my scholarly agenda. Mothering has added a more complex layer to my scholarship and passions for collective liberation. After experiencing the birth of my first born and seeing how my level of privilege did not buffer me from several instances of obstetric violence, or dismissiveness, I began to explore reproductive justice with birthing women of color. I became a birth doula and decided to work towards obtaining my Perinatal Mental Health Certificate through Postpartum Support International. I also met a dear friend and colleague whose work centers reproductive justice and the perinatal mental health of Black birthing women. After listening to her on a podcast, I boldly emailed her to connect and to see how I could join and support her endeavors. Within that connection, I have experienced a beautiful integration of the creative soul work that is motherscholaring with our various intersecting identities, her a Black woman from the South and me a Puerto Rican woman. I have experienced an interdependence that I had only experienced at an NBCC conference during my doctoral studies. There has been normalcy and beautiful celebrations of our children being in Zoom meetings, at conferences with us, and making noise in the middle of professional presentations that I had not experienced elsewhere. Our children and spouses know each other; they know us as motherscholars and are unapologetically involved and invited into the joy of our liberative work. That experience of wholeness is an experience I hope can be replicated within school counselor education as the profession moves toward deeper liberation from systems of oppression.

Discussion

School counseling is facing a crisis of representation. If the profession is going to make progress toward increasing the representative diversity of professional school counselors, scholars and school counselor educators must find ways to facilitate a sense of homeplace for potential school counselors and school counselor educators within PK-12 and higher education spaces. ASCA (2024) explicitly emphasizes the school counselors role in "establish[ing] inclusive and welcoming learning environments in which all students can thrive and reach their full potential." One way of impacting the profession's diversity may be to diversify the available narratives of PID for potential candidates who exist at various intersections of marginalized identities. This autoethnography illustrated one narrative that diverged from the status quo of school counselor educator PID and explored the integration of personal and professional identities.

My time throughout my doctoral program and the first three years on the tenure-track (2018-2023) were flooded with experiences of passive, overt, and incognito oppression. However, they were also flooded with generational, cultural, and collective ways of knowing and resistance. The supportive and collective nature of this autoethnography is mirrored by ASCA's position statement on family-school-community partnerships (2022). ASCA asserts that it is the school counselor's responsibility to advocate and collaborate with stakeholders outside of the school building, to support students' culturally embedded protective factors. Additionally, understanding my experiences through the lens of various identity-specific theories, namely, Latine PID, Mujerista psychology, and motherscholaring, was empowering and highlighted a way of being within an institution, namely academia, that may be more sustainable for a lifelong career within an academic structure. By combining several theories, I worked to develop a sense of meaning of the complexity of my identities and how I might find or create a homeplace within academia.

School counselors are advocates for students development of positive identities through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2023). Systems of domination and oppression, like White supremacy, will always have an impact on marginalized students and school counselors. Therefore, school counselors can be culturally sustaining in their work by exploring their own racial-ethnic identity development and then supporting the racial-ethnic identity development of their students. Mayes et al., (2024), provide an exemplary approach to using Tier 2 group counseling to support Black girls identity development within an oppressive system. Additionally, Thompson (2024), explored the impact of racial trauma on the recruitment and retention of Black and Latinx school counselors. Consistent with the trickle-down approach to diversification efforts, they found that "positive school environments could mitigate systemic negative racial interactions, improving student academic and behavioral outcomes and positively impacting Black and Latinx school counselors. (p. xii)".

There were several ways that my PID has and continues to defy the status quo. For instance, family, community, and collective were significant supports in the face of oppressive experiences. While exploring the memories recalled, it became apparent that my coping strategies were not individualistic, highlighting the collective value of Latinidad and decentering the rugged individualism of American Whiteness (Bordas, 2023; Okun, 2024). I often relied on both family and other elders with similar experiences to support my resistance of individualism or to empower me in a collective way of knowing who I am outside of the standards of academia. Resisting assimilation into a White Eurocentric way of being a school counselor educator required much more than simple willpower. It required a collective belief in the value of where my identities come from and my inherent value outside of White supremacy cultural norms (Okun, 2024).

The critical incidents that aligned with the themes of finding my voice and disrupting the norm strongly align with the ASCA National Model position on the school counselors role as a leader, advocate and systems change agent (2019). School counselors are often pulled into help facilitate reconciliation or conflict resolution between varying parties. A culturally competent school counselor might consider how a student, parent, or faculty members culture might be impacting the way they are engaging within a conflict. For instance, in my direct nature to resolve conflict amongst colleagues, I was labeled as uncommitted and aggressive, even though I felt a deep sense of commitment to growth and reconciliation. Disrupting the passive-avoidant pattern of conflict resolution was risky, however, it allowed me to be authentic and fully bring my personal and professional values to the table. There was no masking or 'acting White' which could have potentially pushed me further into assimilation.

Identities are constantly evolving, emerging, and transforming within sociopolitical contexts. Seeing identities as static, or having an ultimate arrival point, was incongruent with my own experience of PID. For example, during my process of reflexively making meaning of my PID and, ultimately, my place within the academy, I found it most challenging to find a place for the wholeness I seek as a mother. Motherscholaring epistemology was my attempt at making meaning of ways to integrate the soul work of mothering with the soul work of collective liberation. My difficulty with this portion of data analysis was likely due to the developing epistemology of motherscholaring within and outside of counselor education. It is also important to note that my mothering identity is my newest identity. In fact, as I conducted this autoethnography, I was 38 weeks pregnant with my second child. Additionally, less than a sixth of the data encompassed the time period of my mothering identity. The novelty of this identity has my development in a constant state of change, in a state of disequilibrium. In keeping with my culturally embedded patterns of resistance, leaning on other motherscholar elders within and outside my community supported me through the emergence of this identity and will continue to support its development.

There was a high degree of consensus during the auditing process among all three content experts. During the coding process, I used colors to code the year in which a critical incident occurred. Using colors allowed me and my content experts to see clear patterns across time and themes. For instance, there was a higher number of critical incidents that occurred within the first year and a half of my doctoral program and my tenure-track years that aligned with the theme, being one of the few/critical awareness. As I discussed this pattern with my content experts, we hypothesized why this may have occurred. The COVID-19 pandemic started about halfway through my doctoral studies, and I was on parental leave a year after I started on the tenure track. It could be that these patterns emerged due to the diminished level of proximity to peers and the system at large, thereby decreasing the potential for experiences of oppression or othering in a more direct sense (Fan & Moen, 2023). This pattern may have also emerged simply out of time spent as a member of a system, and experiences of isolation diminishing with more time being spent within a certain context. One final hypothesis we discussed was the consideration of sociopolitical events that were occurring nationally and globally that may have been impacting my PID and that of peers around me. Table 1 provides more details about national and global events that may have impacted my PID and critical incidents.

Implications

Action must be taken to address the crisis of representation within counselor education and, more specifically, school counseling. This autoethnography exemplifies one action that may affect the profession's effort in diversification within school counseling practice, education, research, and policy.

School Counseling Practice

A student's sense of homeplace begins with their own experiences throughout their PK-12 education. Professional school counselors must find ways to normalize the connection between home and school life (ASCA, 2022). This can be done by example, but it may also be accomplished by integrating the values of wholeness, collectiveness, and community throughout the school counseling curriculum. For example, González-Rosario and Gibbons (2024) provided various vignettes of how school counselors can support students' racial-ethnic identity development within individual, small group, and classroom instruction as a pillar of strength to support culturally and linguistically diverse students. School counselors must engage in their own reflective process of their own identity development, particularly if they belong to dominate groups (i.e. White, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender etc.; ASCA, 2021). Furthermore, discussing racial-ethnic identity development with all staff within a school-building might be one way to support students racial-ethnic identity development. This may be done through professional learning communities, book clubs, or school counselor-led professional development during faculty meetings. Additionally, school counselors can invite families to engage with the school counseling curriculum and ensure representation on school counseling advisory boards. If accessing specific identity groups proves difficult, school

counselors may consider engaging with cultural brokers within the community, for instance, clergy, local business owners, or not-for-profit organizations that are frequented by the student population. As was evident throughout this autoethnography, providing safe spaces for students across PK-12 to process their experiences of oppression and to tap into cultural coping skills may be essential to supporting students' sense of wholeness across the lifespan. School counselors may facilitate these spaces; however, engaging community members or utilizing student-led groups may be more valuable. In this context, the school counselor should function as the bridge that navigates the micropolitics and administrative requirements for having such spaces existing within public schools, particularly considering the current hostile legislative environment around diversity in PK-12 education.

School Counselor Education

School counselor educators also play a pivotal role in the socialization process of all students they encounter but require a higher degree of intentionality when supporting the recruitment and retention of diverse school counselors. Various counselor educators have laid out strategies to diversifying the profession over the last five years, albeit with little focus on the unique positionality of school counseling recruitment needs. One strategy that is often referenced includes diversifying the theories taught throughout the curriculum. For example, including Mujerismo and Womanism within the theories class while also having students practice ways of applying these theories within a PK-12 context may support students sense of homeplace, commitment to the profession, and an ability to envision themselves as a part of the profession rather than an alien within the profession. Similar to supporting PK-12 students, school counselor educators may also promote affinity spaces within their programs, through Chi Sigma Iota, or connections with community organizations. These spaces may provide an immense value for students to name and process their experiences as BIPOC students within a White academic structure. Counselor educators may consider creating mentorship programs for current school counselors considering doctoral studies. For example, inviting site supervisors to an information session and pairing them with a mentor may provide an opportunity for school counselors to explore the potential benefits and realities of pursuing doctoral education. Mentorship was a clear protective factor in my PID; therefore, school counselor educators must continually find ways to match school counselors and students with professionals who can support their unique identities within a predominantly White profession. Additionally, counselor educators must consider how their programs support students from all identity markers; school counselor educators may consider how their syllabus communicates language around accommodations for parenting students, caretaking students, or students integrally connected to a larger community for support. Accommodations like these may be outside of standard university policy and protocol but are centered around the humanistic values of the profession.

School Counseling Research

Giving voice to those who are systematically silenced is critical to school counseling diversification efforts and advocacy is central pillar of the school counselors role (ASCA, 2019). Research is one way to use the academic structure to break down the walls of the academic machine and to support advocacy for collective liberation. For instance, various methodologies are supportive of this advocacy goal. For example, participatory and community action research work to ensure that the voices of the communities being impacted by the research remain at the center, and change that is desired by the community is what is implemented. In alignment with Falco and Mayes (2025) content analysis of the Professional school counseling journal. School counselor educators can partner with practicing school counselors on the use of autoethnographic research methods to explore BIPOC school counselor PID. Additionally, it is critical through research to expand our ways of knowing outside of what is published within peer-reviewed academic journals. For example, integrating wisdom from stories, autoethnographies, narratives, folklore, or even cultural proverbs are valuable ways of knowing that may be integrated into research through art, music, dance, and other forms of valuable scholarship. The academic need to package these forms of wisdom into a peer-review manuscript, only accessible to an elite few, needs to be challenged. Additionally, counselor education needs more research that centers on Mujerista and Womanist theories of knowing. These theories of research, although similar to feminist research, focus on the experiences of women of color and the resistance that has supported their thriving in wholeness for centuries (Nygreen et al., 2016). Counselor education would benefit from understanding how these theories may support students from similar or adjacent backgrounds.

School Counseling Policy

School counseling and diversity, equity, and inclusion is under legislative attack in various parts of the United States, particularly within K-12 and higher education. For example, In Alabama, there has been an explicit attack on the use of the ASCA National Model and Professional Standards (Alabamba, HB4577). In Florida, Chaplains are now allowed to provide school counseling services regardless of previous training in child and adolescent mental health (Florida HB 931). Finally, in North Carolina the Parents Bill of Rights has put school counselors in an ethical dilemma between the law and ethics by requiring school counselors to inform parents or guardians of students choice in name and/or pronouns, thereby chipping away at the therapeutic relationship and sense of safety that often characterizes the student-counselor relationship (NC Senate Bill 49). As leaders and advocates, school counselors and school counselor educators can disrupt the norm and make space for their minoritized students by staying abreast of the legislative concerns impacting minoritized students. Similar to my experience within NBCC and the PSC Emerging scholars program, school counselors can work to connect to a homeplace as a political refuge, within formal collective groups such as professional organizations at the local, state, and/or national levels. School counselor educators can be intentional in mentoring school counselors in the community to pull them into the realm

of advocacy by leveraging their understanding of larger macro-level systems. Finally, school counselors can use liberative forms of research like this autoethnography to support policy change.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this autoethnographic study is that I remained the sole informant for the analyzed data. Knowing this was an expected limitation of autoethnographic studies; I employed data triangulation through various data points and theory triangulation through content experts. Additionally, an inductive approach to auto-ethnography might have revealed different themes or an entirely different theory. A strength of this study was the use of content experts who were both engaged in the academic structure and content experts who were not engaged in the academic structure. These differences in content experts strengthened the trustworthiness of this study and enhanced my reflective process toward collective liberation. On the other hand, all three content experts shared Latine-femme identities and a commitment to collective liberation. These similarities may have limited the potential for critical perspectives in data interpretation, while simultaneously increasing their ability to provide perspective through their own experiences within a PWI. Additionally, this study should not be generalized to any group of people who share my identities but rather should be considered through an understanding that my experience is the result of a complex web of intersecting identities within a specific sociopolitical context. Instead, readers should strive to "feel the moral dilemmas, think with [my] story, instead of about it" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; p. 735) and allow the feeling to help them communicate with themselves and others.

Conclusion

This manuscript sought to illustrate a different path of PID and integration to increase narrative representation to support professional diversification efforts of school counseling. The results of this autoethnography align with previous literature on Latine PID and Mujerista psychology to highlight a different path towards wholeness within academia as a Latine, Mujerista, motherscholar within school counselor education. The goal of this autoethnography was not to generalize one person's experience but rather to normalize the experience of others and to expand the available narratives of Latine PID. Essentially, this autoethnography aimed to illustrate a process of finding a homeplace for others with similar intersecting identities and to illicit meaningfully personal meaning-making for coconspirators seeking to diversify the school counseling and counselor education professions.

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Table 1

Example chart used for the Data Collection Process

Academic year	World/U.S. events	Personal life events	Critical incidents
2018/2019	• March for our lives • Midterm election - republican majority • #METOO movement goes global • Anti-immigrant rhetoric and abuse @ the border • Family separation at its peak at US/MX border	• Moved to TN • Started PhD • Had 3 jobs • Food stamps	• "We are not that broke" • "oh, you're not a first-gen?" • Told to get writing support from international student union • "No speaky Spanish" • Faculty removed from direct instruction with my cohort • Started volunteering at Centro Hispano • Introduced to Juana Bordas • Ready to quit PhD, mother and aunt would not allow it. lol
2019/2020	• COVID – 19 Pandemic • BLM Protests worldwide	• Awarded NBCC- MFP • Attended first ACES • Met Spouse	• Attended NBCC Symposium

	• High-profile/publicized murders on Black bodies • Police violence increase • PR Earthquakes Jan. 2020 • Hate crimes at a decade high (2020) as reported by FBI	• Quarantined with partners White Mennonite family • ½ the year was remote	• My skin was whitened in photo editing by a peer
2020/2021	• Biden/Harris win election • White house insurrection • Trump stacked US Supreme Court	• Entire year was remote • Writing retreats with 2 peers • Job search • Got a TT job • Graduated with PhD • Got married	• "Be careful what you ask for when you are asking for diversity" • "She will create her own space" • Institution refused to negotiate a monitor after job offer and initial salary negotiation.

Reimagining School Counseling for Black Girls: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Black Feminist Thought in School Counseling

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study explores the experiences of a former high school counselor through the lens of Black Feminist Thought (BFT). Centering the intersecting identities of Black girls and the systemic barriers they face in school settings, this paper reflects on three narratives drawn from almost a decade of practice in a large, urban high school in central Virginia. These stories examine themes such as adultification bias increased school counselor awareness and commitment to systemic change to address inequities; the pressure to be perfect, post-COVID disconnection and the need for intentional, safe spaces. Through personal reflection, scholarly literature, and critical inquiry, this study challenges dominant narratives in school counseling and offers insight into how counselors can more effectively support Black girls. The findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive, relationship-centered practices that affirm students' full identities and foster educational environments where they can thrive.

Introduction

"It is not enough for us to reproduce the way things are. We must shift from what is to what could be" (Greene, 1995, p. 1). This call to action captures the heart of my practice and scholarship. Reimagining school counseling for Black girls requires me to move beyond status quo practices and envision bold, equity-centered interventions that validate their humanity, honor their experiences, and transform educational spaces.

The experiences of Black girls in schools are shaped by policies and practices that fail to account for the intersectionality of their identities. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 1990) offers a critical framework for understanding how race, gender, class, and systemic oppression intersect within school spaces, shaping Black girls' academic and social-emotional experiences. Despite growing discussions about the youth mental health crisis and school-based mental health (SBMH), Black girls remain underserved and overlooked (Tillery, 2025).

This study uses autoethnography to examine how my experiences as a school counselor deepened my engagement with BFT and transformed how I supported Black girls in school settings. Through a series of personal narratives, I reflect on my time as a school counselor, I witnessed how the following shaped the school experiences of Black girls: (a) adultification bias and policing of Black girls; (b) increased school counselor awareness of systemic disparities and shifting of role conceptualization; (c) internalized pressure to succeed; and (d) post-pandemic disconnection and the necessity of intentional safe spaces. These reflections informed the development of several school counseling interventions, including sister circles, bibliocounseling small groups, and a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project, each designed to

celebrate identity, promote emotional well-being, and build self-efficacy. This paper encourages the integration of BFT into school counseling by revealing an open and honest account of the experience of a Black woman school counselor.

Black Feminist Thought in Education and School Counseling

Exploring Black Feminist Thought in K–12 Education

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) can be considered a theoretical framework and a practice that provides a lens to understand, challenge, and resist systemic oppression as it uniquely impacts Black women and girls (Brown, 2009; Collins, 2000; Jacobs, 2016). While the term gained academic prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s, its foundations are much older, rooted in Black women's lived experiences, resistance, and intellectual traditions across generations (Johnson, 2015). BFT invites educators, practitioners, scholars, and researchers to engage Black women and girls as knowledge holders and agents of change while challenging systems that marginalize them, while celebrating their brilliance (Jacobs, 2016; Riddick, 2025). In fact, BFT challenges dominant narratives by centering lived experience, intersectionality, and collective action as essential elements of social transformation (Collins,1996; 2015). Also, BFT addresses the limitations of mainstream feminism, which often failed to consider the specific ways race, gender, and class intersect in the lives of Black women and other women of color (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Kendall, 2020).

Importantly, BFT is not a singular or fixed ideology. As Copes (2021) shares in her *Black Feminist Starter Library*, “Black feminists are diverse thinkers… not to present any texts or writers as having the correct framework for teaching” (Introduction Section, para.2). Evans-Winters (2019) similarly presents Black feminism as a “mosaic,” a living tradition shaped by Black women's (and girls') unique histories, skills, and identities across the diaspora. Like the art form, composed of small, distinct pieces arranged to form a larger image, BFT is constructed through diverse perspectives, experiences, and intellectual traditions (Evans-Winters, 2019). My engagement with BFT is ongoing and reflective, grounded in a commitment to learning from this rich and ever-expanding body of knowledge.

Black feminist scholars have long engaged with the field of education, challenging the marginalization of Black girls and women in schools and the limitations of research frameworks and schooling practices that pathologize their experiences (Apugo et al.,2023; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). These scholars argue that educational spaces often reproduce the very oppressions they should dismantle, such as, racism, patriarchy, classism, and heteronormativity (Apugo et al., 2023; Morris, 2016; Riddick, 2025). bell hooks (1994) emphasizes that liberatory teaching begins with truly knowing students’ communities, histories, and realities. While her work did not focus solely on K–12 schools, the message is still deeply relevant: education should be rooted in connection and care (Tillery, 2025).

As a Black woman practitioner and scholar, I view BFT as a guide and a challenge that pushes me to continuously interrogate how I show up for Black girls in my work with humility. For school counselors, this requires a critical examination of policies and practices, the co-creation of supportive interventions, and a commitment to centering Black girls' lived experiences as valid sources of knowledge and direction for change.

Applying Black Feminist Thought to School Counseling

School counselors are charged with supporting students' academic, career, and social/emotional development through a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). ASCA's ethical standards also call for culturally competent, equity-centered services, particularly for historically marginalized students (ASCA, 2022). In particular, BFT offers school counselors a critical lens for recognizing how Black girls are often misunderstood, misrepresented, and underserved in educational spaces, such as school counseling (Tillery, 2025).

Why focus on Black Girls?

Across the nation, Black girls face layered educational inequities that extend beyond academics. Research shows they are more likely to be disciplined for subjective infractions such as "defiance" or "attitude," often based on adult perceptions rather than actual rule violations (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2015). They are disproportionately suspended or expelled, under-identified for gifted programs, and routinely excluded from conversations about student mental health (Anyiwo et al., 2022; Ezell et al., 2024; Morris, 2015; Tillery, 2025). These patterns contribute to what scholars describe as the "adultification" of Black girls. This societal bias perceives them as more mature and less innocent than their white counterparts, often leading to harsher treatment and fewer supports (Epstein et al., 2017).

Prior research has documented how school staff may hold implicit biases that shape their perceptions of Black girls. For example, Ezell et al. (2024) found that educators often described Black female students as aggressive or domineering and framed their interpersonal conflicts as impulsive or trivial. These perceptions, while sometimes accompanied by an awareness of structural challenges, can still result in limited patience and reduced support for Black girls navigating school systems (Tillery, 2025).

Mental health disparities further underscore the need for culturally responsive school counseling. Nearly 60% of Black girls and young women ages 12–26 reported depressive symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 69% reported heightened anxiety (Allen et al., 2021). Black female students have shown increased rates of suicidal ideation compared to their peers (CDC, 2021), and suicide rates among Black girls aged 13–19 rose by 182% between 2001 and 2017 (Ncube et al., 2022). These statistics signal an urgent call for school counselors to

adopt healing-centered, equity-focused strategies that affirm the emotional well-being of Black girls.

BFT can support this work by helping counselors reflect on how race, gender, class, and other social identities shape students' educational experiences. For Black girls, these intersecting forces often result in heightened scrutiny, emotional distress, and limited access to support (Apugo et al., 2023; Tillery, 2025). Monique W. Morris (2015) states that schools are primary socializing institutions that deeply influence how Black girls come to understand themselves and how others perceive them. As she writes, "schools are the place where most of our young people spend their days… one of the largest influences on the trajectory of Black girls' lives" (p. 25). Centering BFT in school counseling practice can offer professionals new ways of seeing, listening, and responding to Black girls in ways that honor their full humanity.

At the time of writing, little to no scholarship explicitly connects BFT to school counseling. Scholars like Mayes et al. (2021) have offered substantial insight into how school counselors "can be critical accomplices who support Black girls" (p. 135) in their study utilizing critical race feminism (CRF). CRF is vital for naming how race and gender shape Black girls' school experiences and challenging how they are often left out of broader conversations (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). However, BFT helped shape my thinking and growth as a school counselor, by giving me the language for what I witnessed and felt as I was evolving. It can still offer a meaningful guideline for school counselors to better understand and support Black girls by acknowledging their lived experiences and challenging the systems that often fail them.

Positionality Statement

Reflecting on positionality is a vital part of critical qualitative research. It requires acknowledging how personal identity, lived experience, and professional practice shape the lens through which we engage with our work. Boveda and Annamma (2023) share that researchers must attend to their positionality throughout the research process, considering how embodied experiences influence their understanding of intersectional oppression.

I grew up as a Black girl in a small town in North Carolina before moving to a more urban area in Virginia. My early years in school were shaped by joy and harm. I was yelled at in kindergarten by a teacher's assistant, a Black woman, for eating the "wrong" snack during a classroom holiday party. In third grade, I was wrongly accused of stealing a white classmate's purse even though our desks were not near each other. In fifth grade, I was called the N-word by a kid. These moments stuck with me. They serve as reminders of how early Black girls can become targets of suspicion, discipline, or silencing. When I moved to Virginia, I was surrounded by more Black peers and educators. I was still teased for my accent or outfits, but I also felt smart, creative, and seen. I thought that I was exceptional, not an exception.

I do not remember seeing my school counselor much in elementary or middle school. However, my high school counselor, who was also my tennis coach, was a kind, thoughtful Black man who consistently found ways to support us, whether through college application fee waivers or informal encouragement. I never went to him for emotional support, but looking back, I am unsure if I realized that was an option. Mental health simply was not part of our conversation in the early 2000s. I developed coping strategies and moved through school largely believing that I could figure it out on my own.

These early experiences informed how I showed up as a school counselor. I began my counseling career after five years as a teacher, working in a large, historically segregated district in central Virginia. Even today, the district is divided along racial and economic lines, its west side more affluent and white, and its east side home to students and families who are predominantly Black, Latinx, and multilingual, with varied socioeconomic backgrounds. I served at the same high school for my entire tenure, a school that grew to over 2,000 students by my final year. Our team had seven counselors. My role included a 9th –12th-grade alpha caseload and all students enrolled in the Center for Engineering. I co-led many of our freshman transition efforts due to my time as a middle school teacher. I served on our Multi-Tiered Systems of Support team, school improvement teams, and the district's inaugural equity and diversity advisory committee. I became a resource to colleagues who wanted to better support Black girls and students of color, or to some, just another "woke" educator.

My students were dynamic. I worked with teen parents, future Ivy Leaguers, emerging influencers, athletes, and aspiring engineers. The Black girls at my school were not a monolith. They were loud and quiet, reserved and opinionated, cautious and courageous. And they were all worthy of support rooted in care, dignity, and respect. I did not want to be the counselor who only focused on college applications (for a select few) or waited in her office to be needed. I wanted every student to know I was their counselor and that I saw them fully. That commitment, to presence, purpose, and justice, shapes how I show up as a scholar.

My identity as a first-generation Ph.D., practitioner-scholar, and descendant of Southern sharecroppers continues to influence my research. The legacy of my grandmothers, Queen and Hazel, and the resilience of the women in my family ground my work. Their stories of survival and resistance remind me that research can be more than knowledge production; it can be a form of reclamation. My professional identity is political. As Riddick (2025) notes, BFT is rooted in the lived experiences of Black women, especially educators and activists, whose work in schools and communities shapes how they understand education, oppression, and transformation. In that tradition, my approach to school counseling has always been relational and activist. It is a reclamation of voice, a disruption of silence, and a call to create school environments where Black girls are encouraged, supported, and empowered.

Methodology

This study employs critical qualitative research through the use of autoethnography, a methodology that blends personal narrative with critical cultural analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis et al., 2010) Rooted in the belief that lived experience is a legitimate source of knowledge, autoethnography positions the researcher as subject and analyst (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hannon, 2017). It allows reflection, vulnerability, and meaning-making, especially when exploring identity, oppression, and resistance within institutions (Chan et al., 2021; Steadman, 2021; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). This approach is particularly fitting for examining my experiences as a Black school counselor because it centers emotion, positionality, and storytelling as valid ways of knowing (Griffin, 2012; Hannon, 2017).

My reflections are situated within my personal history and professional practice. These insights are not presented as universal truths, but as deeply contextualized narratives that contribute to broader conversations about equity and care in education. Chan et al. (2021) support this non-traditional research paradigm by asserting that "the power of autoethnography stems from its diversity in presentation and strategies" (p. 250). Bonchner and Ellis (2016) describe the ethical obligations of an autoethnographer as a duty "to give something back to the people or communities we study and write about..." (p. 56). While this methodology may differ from traditional paradigms, it is no less rigorous, and the potential reach it has to empower other school counselors is limitless.

Data Collection and Analysis

To identify the stories shared in this study, I revisited personal journal entries written during my years as a school counselor. Journaling has long been a form of self-reflection and memory preservation, dating back to my childhood. These entries captured significant moments, emotional responses, and the everyday realities of working in schools with and for Black girls. It feels full circle that the journals I kept as a school counselor now serve as meaningful artifacts in this study. Specifically, in reviewing the journals, I engaged in a reflective coding process, identifying recurring emotions, themes, and questions that surfaced across entries. I used open coding to label moments that connected to broader ideas such as adultification, resistance, care, and belonging codes that later helped me shape the structure of each narrative.

To address a common pitfall of autoethnography, which involves relying solely on personal memory for data construction (Chang, 2016), I connected with a few former students and colleagues to ensure I honored their contributions with accuracy and care. Through this data triangulation, or using multiple forms of data, I engaged in a communal act of storytelling, rooted in the understanding that selfhood is shaped through relationships within a community (Chang, 2016). Through conversations and oral retellings, I clarified details, confirmed shared recollections, and deepened my emotional understanding of each moment. These interactions

helped me refine which stories to include and how to frame them with authenticity and integrity.

Trustworthiness Strategies

To support trustworthiness, I prioritized reflexivity through ongoing journaling and critical self-reflection to examine my positionality, assumptions, and interpretations (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). These practices helped surface bias and aligned with BFT's emphasis on lived experience and situated knowledge. In addition to reflexive strategies, I incorporated informal forms of triangulation and member engagement, as previously described, to support accuracy and care in meaning-making (Chang, 2016).

My Journey into Black Feminist Thought: Understanding and Discussing the Barriers Black Girls Face

In reviewing the journals and analyzing data, I selected three stories representing three stages of my professional journey. In my first story, I discuss my early years, navigating identity and voice, and initiating my awareness, which served as a personal reckoning and a process of unlearning. In my second story, I unpacked a pivotal advocacy experience involving systemic resistance. Then, in my third story, I relay a moment of transformation marked by healing and alignment with my purpose. Throughout each story, I also weave in a Discussion section, reflecting on each story with related literature.

Story #1: The Dress Code Realization (2017) – The Beginning of My Awareness

Before being hired as a full-time school counselor, I was a board school counselor (long-term substitute) assigned to a predominantly white, affluent middle school in the West End of my district. One morning, I noticed a student wearing an oversized t-shirt that concealed her shorts, making it appear like she had no bottoms. I asked her to adjust her clothing to meet the dress code. Her response, "You're the only one who's ever said anything about this", marked a turning point in my understanding of systemic disparities in discipline.

I knew that if this same outfit were worn by a Black girl in the East End, where the district's Black population was more concentrated, she would likely face punitive consequences, including being pulled out of class or even suspended. Research confirms that Black girls are disproportionately disciplined for dress code violations (Mbalia et al., 2024; National Women's Law Center, 2018). According to Knipp and Stevenson (2021), the enforcement of dress code policies often functions as a mechanism for policing and hypersexualizing Black girls, subjecting their bodies to scrutiny that is not applied equally to their white peers. These disparities reflect broader systemic patterns in which Black girls are criminalized simply for existing. As Mbalia et al. (2024) note, this criminalization extends beyond school discipline to include societal narratives that dehumanize Black girls and contribute to their exclusion from spaces meant to support them. Their findings also highlight that dress code violations often lead to harsher

punishments for Black girls compared to their peers, emphasizing the intersectional challenges they face in educational environments.

This moment forced me to reflect on the systems I was upholding and how my well-intentioned actions could still contribute to inequity. It marked the beginning of my awareness of adultification bias and the ways Black girls are policed in school environments. At the time, I did not have the language or theoretical grounding to name what I was witnessing. I was not familiar with Black Feminist Thought yet, but this interaction planted a seed. It lingered in my mind, shaping how I noticed other disparities in the building and across the district. Over time, this awareness grew into a deeper reflection on my role as a school counselor, specifically, how I could move beyond compliance and begin to challenge systemic disparities. Later, through my doctoral studies, I would come to understand how frameworks like Black Feminist Thought could help explain and challenge these patterns. This early experience, while small on the surface, became part of a larger shift in how I viewed my role as a school counselor and advocate for Black girls' freedom, expression, and dignity.

Story #2: The High-Achieving Black Girl & the Pressure to be Perfect (2017-2023)

Over the years, I have worked with many high-achieving Black girls who consistently pushed themselves to the edge. They excelled in Advanced Placement and dual enrollment classes, led clubs, and managed responsibilities at home, often without asking for help. From the outside, they appeared to be model students. However, behind the accolades, I frequently saw exhaustion, anxiety, and an overwhelming fear of failure.

For instance, one student wept in my office after receiving her first C on her quarterly report card, convinced she had let down everyone who believed in her. Another student, who will be the primary focus of this story, attended school while recovering from not one but two concussions. She minimized her symptoms, insisting she was "okay". These high-achieving girls expressed to me that they often felt they could not afford to make mistakes. Their self-worth was tightly tied to performance, and the pressure to be perfect overshadowed their ability to simply be.

This sense of hyper-responsibility is not coincidental. While I previously mentioned adultification bias concerning school discipline, it also manifests as the expectation that Black girls be self-sufficient, emotionally composed, and academically exceptional without adequate support (Epstein et al., 2017). Research shows that Black girls are perceived as more mature and capable than their peers, often expected to be "pseudoadults" long before they are ready (Bentley-Edwards & Adams, 2024; Epstein et al., 2017; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Thomas and Jackson (2007) explained that this expectation resulted in them receiving less grace, less emotional support, and less room for error.

I witnessed this pattern clearly while navigating formal accommodations (i.e., Section 504 Plans) for the student with the double concussion. Although coordinating 504 Plans is considered a non-counseling duty by ASCA, it fell under our responsibilities in my district. In this case, the student's mother and I actively advocated for her needs to be met. Despite our efforts, a few teachers appeared unwilling to extend grace or make accommodations. The pressure she internalized was not coming from home; it was reinforced by a school environment where some adults expected her to "power through" instead of heal. This experience revealed how adultification bias functions at the interpersonal level and in the broader school culture. As Mayes et al. (2024) note, high-achieving Black girls often face stereotypes and subjective judgments from school personnel, which intensify the pressure to maintain perfection and mask their vulnerability.

I learned from these high-achieving and hyper-responsible Black girls that strength should not be measured by how much one can carry. Many Black girls were praised for their resilience but rarely offered rest. As explored in various studies, including Inniss-Thompson et al. (2022) and Johnson et al. (2023), educators such as school counselors should consider how constant societal pressures can obscure Black girls' mental health needs. We can notice the students who smile while enduring silent struggles by connecting and building relationships. Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) emphasized that adequate support must consider the multifaceted experiences of Black girls to foster an environment where they are successful and secure. Ultimately, we can remind them they are enough, even when they pause, say no, or rest.

Story #3: Post-COVID Disconnection and the Need for Intentional Safe Spaces (2021-2023)

The 2021–2022 school year marked our full return to in-person learning after the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. That first week back was chaotic, but one particular moment still lingers. I intervened in a contentious argument between two Black freshman girls outside my office. When I asked one of them what was going on, she simply said, "It's on sight." Through our conversation, I learned that the conflict stemmed from something back in seventh grade, the last time the girls had seen each other before schools shut down. Her reaction was a reminder that, for many students, time had not moved forward socially or emotionally. The tension, pain, and unresolved dynamics from middle school were not addressed; they were just postponed.

Later that semester, another Black girl not on my caseload was being separated from other students by school resource officers after an altercation. I asked if she could sit in my office to de-escalate because I felt uncomfortable with her being alone with law enforcement. Once inside, she expressed her anger by throwing papers across the room. However, instead of reacting with frustration, I stayed calm. We kept things low-key and slowly began talking. By the end of our time together, she picked up the papers herself and re-centered. What stayed with

me most was how she started checking in with me voluntarily in the days that followed—that moment of connection built trust, though brief and slightly messy.

These experiences made one thing clear: Black girls needed more than behavior redirection. Research indicates that self-knowledge and identity awareness are foundational for Black girls navigating their educational experiences (Ncube et al., 2022). They deserved spaces to speak freely, feel safe, process emotions, and exist beyond adult expectations and school policy. They needed environments where they could show up fully, not as problems to be solved (Evan-Winters, 2019). Stereotypes depicting Black girls as angry, loud, or aggressive continue to shape how they are perceived in school spaces, leading to over-surveillance and missed opportunities for connection (Annamma et al., 2019; Ezell et al., 2024; Morris, 2015; Watson, 2016). Without intentional safe spaces, the fullness of their identity remains unseen or pathologized.

In response to this need, I co-founded a sister circle with Dr. KáLyn Coghill to provide a structured, affirming space where Black girls could explore identity, increase self-efficacy, and connect emotionally with one another. While this circle became an anchor for many students, it was not the only way we created intentional safe spaces. That calendar year, I co-led a bibliocounseling group using *Grown* by Tiffany D. Jackson, a novel that resonated deeply with the participants. The story opened the door to honest dialogue about relationships, boundaries, power, and emotional well-being. We intentionally invited students who had been referred for discipline in the first quarter of the school year, along with others who needed space to reflect and reconnect.

Although bibliocounseling is underutilized in many high school counseling settings, it holds significant potential when facilitated with cultural intention (Townsend, 2009). When students read stories that reflect their experiences and identities, they can build critical awareness and emotional insight (Byrd et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2019). Research suggests that bibliocounseling can help Black girls and youth develop coping strategies, build cultural connections, and strengthen resilience when navigating peer pressure and societal stereotypes (Byrd et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2019). In our bibliocounseling group, engaging yet relevant stories paired with discussion and reflection helped students develop critical consciousness around race, gender, and social expectations.

As I moved deeper into my doctoral work, I began using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to engage Black girls in reflection and school-based inquiry. YPAR is a collaborative, justice-oriented research methodology that positions youth as experts in their own lives and involves them in identifying issues, conducting research, and taking action to create change in their communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Although my use of YPAR shifted into formal study outside of the school environment, I recognize how this model can also serve as a meaningful tool for school counselors. YPAR aligns with Black Feminist Thought by emphasizing

self-definition, social change, and amplifying the voices of often-silenced youth (Evans-Winters, 2017; Payne, 2023; Foster, 2024). It offers a framework for student-led exploration of systemic inequities and supports young people in imagining more just and empowering educational experiences (Ault, 2017; Clay, 2019). Even when not tied to formal research, school counselors can adapt YPAR principles to co-create interventions that reflect the lived realities of their students.

Throughout this work, whether through bibliocounseling, sister circles, or participatory action research, I noticed richer, more meaningful relationships forming with Black girls who were not even on my caseload. Some of those connections have lasted well beyond their time in school. While I never faced direct resistance to this work, it was often met with excitement, silence, or indifference. Still, what stood out was the impact. Even with only light informal tracking, I saw improved class attendance and positive academic trends. There is so much potential for future research: empirical studies that capture how culturally responsive and affirming school counseling practices and interventions can shift school outcomes and foster connection, healing, and growth.

Discussion

The selection of stories was intentional, representing three distinct stages in my professional journey. Each narrative reflects the layered intersections of race, gender, and profession, offering a critical lens on how a Black woman school counselor experiences and responds to institutional demands while working with Black female students. This selection process aligns with Black Feminist Thought, which amplifies lived experience, personal narrative, and situated knowledge as valid sources of truth (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994). As such, this autoethnography became a methodological home rooted in and responsive to the legacy of Black women's knowledge production.

Thus, together, these narratives offer insight into consistent themes I have observed and experienced throughout my counseling practice: (a) adultification bias and policing of Black girls; (b) increased school counselor awareness of systemic disparities and shifting of role conceptualization; (c) internalized pressure to succeed; and (d) post-pandemic disconnection, and the necessity of intentional safe spaces. Each one represents a different stage in my professional journey. Still, collectively, they illuminate persistent patterns. In the following sections, I discuss four key themes that emerged across the three narratives, grounding each in the broader educational and school counseling literature. This approach offers insight into how my lived experiences reflect and extend the current discourse on supporting Black girls in schools.

Adultification Bias and the Policing of Black Girls: Awareness and Commitment to Systemic Change

The first story captures my early awareness of adultification bias and how discipline is unevenly applied across racial and gendered lines, a symptom of larger systemic inequities. It underscores how school dress codes and discipline policies often criminalize Black girls, viewing their behavior through a hypersexualized or defiant lens (Mbalia et al., 2024; National Women's Law Center, 2018; Knipp & Stevenson, 2021). This reflection revealed how well-intentioned actions by school counselors can unintentionally reinforce inequity, especially when systemic patterns go unexamined. Advocacy requires naming the systems that harm and taking deliberate steps to protect Black girls' dignity and freedom to be (Mayes et al., 2021; Ruffin & Blake, 2023; Tillery, 2025).

This story also served as an early turning point in my professional development. It sparked a deeper awareness of how my actions as a school counselor could either uphold or disrupt inequitable systems. To integrate BFT meaningfully into practice, school counselors must begin with critical self-reflection and strive to understand the lived realities, communities, and histories of the students they serve (hooks, 1994). Awareness becomes the foundation for advocacy. School counselors must also examine the policies and practices they enforce, recognizing their power to perpetuate or dismantle injustice (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022).

Awareness of Systemic Disparities and Internalized Pressure to Succeed

The second story reflects my growing awareness of how systemic disparities operate within education and how my role as a school counselor could evolve. Through this process, I began to see school counseling as an opportunity for healing, relational care, and resistance. My doctoral studies deepened this understanding and provided the theoretical language to articulate and challenge what I had experienced. BFT helped name and guide this shift by encouraging counselors to value lived experience, community knowledge, and care as part of our professional responsibilities (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994).

This same narrative also revealed how Black girls may carry the weight of high expectations, from themselves and the systems around them. This internalized pressure to achieve excellence can be isolating, particularly when schools overlook their emotional needs or view their success as exceptional rather than expected. These experiences mirror broader research findings about how high-achieving Black girls navigate school spaces that often fail to see them fully (Apugo et al., 2023; Ezell et al., 2024; Mayes et al., 2021; 2024). School counselors can recognize how giftedness and mental health intersect and resist practices that ignore students' holistic wellness.

Post-Pandemic Disconnection and the Need for Intentional Safe Spaces

The third story takes place during the pandemic's aftermath, when students returned to schools with heightened mental health needs. Black girls in particular expressed a longing for belonging and understanding. This narrative emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive, intentionally safe spaces designed to respond to trauma, affirm identity, and foster joy (Mance-Early et al., 2022; Ruffin & Blake, 2023). These spaces are not "extra". They are essential and could significantly impact the schooling experiences of Black girls (Tillery, 2025).

Together, these stories and themes are not isolated incidents. They illuminate persistent patterns in schooling that are often overlooked, disciplined, or misunderstood Black girls' needs and strengths (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Apugo et al., 2023; Mayes et al., 2021). They show how everyday counseling interactions require advocacy, critical reflection, and courage. Each reflection is grounded in the literature, connecting personal experience with educational and counseling scholarship.

Recommendations and Implications for School Counselors

The experiences discussed in the three stories align with Black Feminist Thought, which recognizes lived experience, personal narrative, and relational accountability as legitimate sources of knowledge (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994). Grounded in practice and reflection, these insights inform the following implications: calling for an expanded vision of school counseling that centers care, healing, and belonging as essential to educational justice for Black girls. School counselors may consider taking intentional steps to move beyond punitive frameworks and create school environments that honor Black girlhood. These steps could include challenging policies and practices that disproportionately discipline Black girls and disrupting narratives that view their behavior through a deficit lens (Ruffin & Blake, 2023). By recognizing and centering the full identities of Black girls, including their emotions, creativity, leadership, and voice, school counselors can foster spaces where students feel seen, supported, and empowered (Clemons & Cokley, 2022; Ezell et al., 2024). Tools such as the ASCA Closing-the-Gap Action Plan may support this work by helping counselors advocate for systemic change and reduce disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Gay & Swank, 2021).

School counselors might also embed safe spaces and culturally responsive practices throughout their comprehensive programs, rather than reserving them only for moments after harm (Mance-Early et al., 2022; Ruffin & Blake, 2023). These spaces may function as safe spaces intentionally designed to resist marginalization and affirm identity, particularly within group counseling interventions. Practices like sister circles, bibliotherapy, and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) can serve as meaningful, culturally grounded approaches to healing and connection. These interventions, which were discussed throughout the three stories, offer tangible ways to co-create community with students and respond to their stated needs.

Frameworks like the ASCA-Informed Student Needs Assessment can support the development of programs that align with student needs and identities (Boulden, 2022). Grounding this work in Black Feminist Thought may further encourage counselors to center Black girls' lived experiences and perspectives, ensuring that programming is co-created to support their mental health, self-efficacy, and academic success. As school counselors reimagine their role, they might prioritize trust-building, uplift student voices, and implement strengths-based practices that enable Black girls to navigate school and life. Research has shown that school counselors can influence underrepresented students' postsecondary planning, particularly when given the time and resources to build meaningful relationships (Cholewa et al., 2015).

Strong, positive relationships between school counselors and students may be the foundation for more responsive mental health support (Tillery, 2025). When students, particularly Black girls, feel seen and heard, they may be more willing to engage in dialogue around their well-being, including how experiences of racism, marginalization, or school-based trauma affect them (Washington et al., 2023; Tillery, 2025). To foster trusting environments, school counselors could examine how their programs validate students' lived realities and actively resist practices reinforcing deficit-based or exclusionary norms (Clemons & Cokely, 2022). A reimagined counseling practice might center accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and emotional affirmation as core tenets of student support (Mayes et al., 2022; Tillery, 2025). By embracing these possibilities, school counselors may play a critical role in co-creating safe, equitable spaces where Black girls can flourish. For school counselors seeking to deepen their practice or implement the strategies discussed, Appendix A offers a curated list of resources that may serve as a starting point for continued learning and action.

Limitations

This study reflects a single researcher's perspective. While autoethnography allows for deep, contextualized insight, the findings are inherently shaped by my unique experiences, positionality, and interpretations. As such, this study does not claim generalizability and instead offers one lens into the complexities of school counseling through the standpoint of a Black woman scholar-practitioner. Future research may expand on these insights by including the narratives of additional Black women school counselors, particularly those currently practicing in K–12 settings. There are truly so many unheard stories to tell.

Conclusion

Reimagining school counseling for Black girls requires more than changing policies; it demands a commitment to listening, reflection, and transformation. Through the lens of Black Feminist Thought and the practice of autoethnography, I have revisited the moments, students, and interventions that shaped my understanding of what Black girls need to thrive. Whether through everyday advocacy, reflective practice, or intentional acts of care, each of these efforts

shares a clear purpose: cultivating spaces where Black girls are acknowledged, celebrated, and supported in their full humanity.

This paper is not a final answer but a reflection of where I am in my journey. I am still growing in my understanding of Black Feminist Thought; unlearning, learning, and listening. My work, like the work of school counseling itself, is ongoing. As we continue this journey together, may we build schools where Black girls are not merely surviving but living, leading, and flourishing.

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Appendix A. Suggested Resources for School Counselors Supporting Black Girls

Articles, Reports, Videos, and Web-Based Tools

“... and they cared.” How to create better, safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color
BLACK GIRLS MATTER: PUSHED OUT, OVERPOLICED AND UNDERPROTECTED
End Adultification Bias (Video)
End Adultufication Bias (Website)
Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood
Let Her Learn: National Women’s Law Center
Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias
The Untold Stories of Black Girls
Why Won’t Society Let Black Girls be Children?
Bibilocounseling: Using Books In Your School Counseling Program
I Want to Read About Me: Engaging and Empowering Gifted Black Girls Using Multicultural Literature and Bibliotherapy
Promoting Mental Health Literacy through Bibliotherapy in School-Based Settings
Reading Woke: Exploring How School Counselors May Use Bibliotherapy With Adolescent Black Boys
Supporting Students with Bibliocounseling
UC Berkeley Youth Participatory Action Research Hub

Books

Culturally Sustaining School Counseling
Interrupting Racism: Equity and Social Justice in School Counseling
Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools
Sing a Rhythm, Dance a Blues: Education for the Liberation of Black and Brown Girls
Strong Black Girls: Reclaiming Schools in Their Own Image

Predictors of school counselors' coping with death competence

By Katherine M. Wood, Assistant Professor, Tennessee Tech University

Abstract

A quantitative study of 468 school counselors was conducted to examine if years of experience, training in grief and loss, and personal experiences of loss predicted school counselors' coping with death competence. Using a cross-sectional, correlational design, the results answered two research questions utilizing the Coping with Death-Short Version (CDS-SV) scale. Our findings indicated that years of experience as a school counselor, training in grief and loss, and personal experiences of loss increased coping with death competence. Implications for school counselor education, practice, and research and implementing practices for current school counselors as it pertains to grief and loss will also be discussed.

Introduction

Over six million children will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18 (Judi's House, 2024). This estimate, however, excludes other forms of bereavement, such as the death of grandparents, extended family members, or close family friends, and 64% of teachers report observing the adverse effects of grief on children within their classrooms (New York Life, 2024). Grief and loss experiences in childhood and adolescence have the potential to increase psychological and behavioral health problems, contribute to higher incidence of substance use, and are associated with post-traumatic stressors, increased rates of anxiety and depression, and disruptions in interpersonal relationships, academic functioning, and overall well-being (Griese et al., 2017). Quackenbush & Schonfield (2010) identified that students experiencing grief frequently identify a teacher or school counselor as the primary adult source of support following a death.

While teachers may be the initial observers of students' mental health concerns, limited formal training in this area frequently necessitates a referral to school counselors for specialized support (Caldwell, 2019). School counselors play a vital role working with students who have experienced a death loss (Blueford & Gibbons, 2019; Provinak et. al., 2020; Wood et. al., 2023). In a study involving 257 school counselors in Texas, Dougherty (2018) found that 90.2% of participants reported providing support to students experiencing grief and significant loss. Given that school counselors often provide immediate support to students who are grieving, understanding competence in this area is needed to help shape training programs (Dougherty, 2018). Additionally, within training programs of both school and clinical mental health counselors-in-training, Imhoff's (2016) study in CACREP programs in Ohio found that 73.4% of 155 participants were working with clients who had experienced grief, which indicates the prevalence of grief and loss during field experience. These studies highlight the prevalence of grief and loss within both the training and professional experiences of school counselors (Dougherty, 2018; Imhoff, 2016).

Furthermore, there has been some attention on how to integrate grief interventions within schools through the use of the multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) (Blueford et al., 2021b; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). Tier one, focusing on school-wide programs and classroom guidance activities, which can include classroom guidance lessons on types of grief and basic coping skills, developing a school-wide response plan for when a death occurs, how to identify a student grappling with grief, safe spaces within the school building, and/or professional development for teachers on grief and loss (Blueford et al., 2021b; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). Tier two encompasses individual and group counseling, check-ins, collaboration and consultation as a responsive service (Blueford et al., 2021b; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). In addition, for tier two, small groups or peer groups can be formed for those who have recently experienced a loss or are still actively grieving (Blueford et al., 2021b; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). Lastly, Tier three is more specialized and individualized in nature than tier two (Ziomek-Daigle, 2017), and Tier three interventions might include individual counseling, mentoring, more frequent check-ins and/or a referral to a summer grief camp (Blueford et al., 2021b; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017). One study examined the openness to developing a bereavement plan for students, with 72% of respondents being willing to have a formal plan in place to help the student who is grieving (DeMuth et al., 2020), which could be an additional Tier three intervention. The MTSS process can provide assistance at each tier, creating structure and interventions for both students who are grieving and school personnel, such as teachers and school counselors.

Grief and Loss Competence

There have been studies to assess school counselors' grief and loss competencies, yet many studies combined school counselors with other types of counselors, like clinical mental health or family therapists (Harrawood et al., 2011; Wheat et. al., 2019). In one study examining mental health counselors in training, Harrawood and colleagues (2011) had trainees complete a 30-hour course on death education to assess if their perceptions shifted with new knowledge. The 11 participants, across counseling specialties, completed the curriculum and showed increased openness and understanding of their beliefs regarding grief and experienced reduced negative emotions associated with grief and loss (Harrawood et. al., 2011). Blueford et al. 's (2021a) study found that counselors in both clinical mental health and school counseling not only felt uncomfortable addressing grief but also that many counselors had to seek out professional development about grief to feel equipped to address it.

Research on counselors working in clinical settings suggests counselors' coping with death competence, their personal loss history, and their level of academic training influence their comfort and efficacy in working with clients who are grieving (Blueford et al., 2022). In a qualitative study, Blueford et al. (2022) found counselors who had not experienced personal grief felt inadequate to help clients manage a significant loss. Further, counselors in this study were less likely to broach grief and loss with their clients when they had discomfort surrounding

their own grief and mortality (Blueford et. al., 2022). Another study highlighted counselors who lacked adequate death education and training struggling to providing appropriate client care (Ober et al., 2012). These findings are consistent with studies from other helping professions that show lack of grief and loss training affects their competence and efficacy in supporting students who have experienced a death loss (Case et al., 2020; Holland, 2008; Reid & Dixon, 1999). Understanding the science of grief and facilitating bereavement support seem topics most helpful in grief competence (NASG, 2021).

Training in Grief and Loss

Ober et al. (2012) surveyed 369 practicing counselors (both school counselors and clinical mental health), finding that almost 55% of counselors had no course or formal training on grief education, with 91% of respondents believing that grief and loss training should be a required part of counseling curriculum. Findings also suggested that counselors who had personal experiences with grief did not equate to professional knowledge about grief theory and practices (Ober et al., 2012). Montague et al.'s (2020) study showed that only 21% of programs offered a grief course, and even when expanding this study to include related topics of crisis, trauma, or neurocounseling, only 31.4% of counseling programs offered a dedicated course on those subjects (Montague et al., 2020).

These studies demonstrate the importance of formal grief education training to provide school counselors with the tools to help other school personnel members provide the support needed when experiencing grief or helping a student who is grieving.

Personal Experiences with Grief and Loss

While many grief counselors are invested in helping others with loss due to their own experiences, Harris & Howard (2018) identified it does not equate with competence. Ober et. al (2012) found that personal experience with grief and loss did not demonstrate statistical significance when predicting grief competence. Older research studies also support these claims, with Breen (2010-2011) finding that a third of their participants relied on their personal experiences to counsel those who are grieving. Additionally, Deffenbaugh (2008) found that personal experience with loss did not affect a counselor's grief competence.

Although prior research did not support competence, drawing on the work of Servaty-Seib and Corr (2010), emotionally resonant experiences—such as a school counselor's personal encounter with loss—can serve as powerful catalysts for systemic change. Additionally, Doka (2005) emphasizes that personal grief can motivate professionals to address unrecognized or hidden grief and advocate for emotionally supportive environments that acknowledge and validate students' experiences of loss. This variable was added for this study in an effort to add to the current literature and highlight school counselors specifically in the research literature regarding how personal experiences with grief and loss impact the counseling relationship.

Years of Counseling Experience

Research on the correlation between years of counseling experience with grief competence is limited. Ober et al. (2012) found no significance with years of counseling experiences as a predictor of grief competence. An older study by Deffenbaugh (2008) found that years of experience had a negative relationship in their study of 369 licensed professional counselors (LPCs) in Ohio, with practitioners with more than 20 years of experience having significantly lower outcomes of the grief competencies.

While prior research has not found a significant relationship between years of experience and counseling grief competence, Servaty-Seib and Hayslip (2003) identified counselors with more extensive experience tend to exhibit greater confidence and competence in grief support, making them pivotal in leading grief-sensitive initiatives within schools. We sought to inform research within this underdeveloped area, adding more recent findings specific to school counseling to determine if years of experience as a school counselor correlates with grief competence.

Current Study

The current study contributes to the literature exploring the different variables of training, impact of personal losses, and years of counseling experience, with a specific focus on school counselors. The three variables of (1) training in grief and loss, (2) personal experience with grief, and (3) years of experience as a school counselor as it relates to grief competence have been sparsely studied. The current study seeks to contribute to school counseling research through a correlational design, which provides an understanding and assessment of the strength of relationship between variables (Graziano & Raulin, 2020) as it relates to the school counselor's ability to cope with death. "The coping with death competence is a construct that represents a wide range of skills for facing death, as well as our beliefs and attitudes about these capacities" (Galina et al., 2019, p.210). By examining the strength of the relationship between coping with death and the variables (training, personal experience, and years of school counseling experience), the study findings will provide insight into how the beliefs and attitudes of school counselors' impact their perceived ability to cope when encountering students who are experiencing a death loss. Additionally, by understanding the relationships between these variables, it can help to inform interventions and practices needed for school counselors who encounter death losses. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to better understand school counselors' beliefs and attitudes toward death losses and inform school counseling training.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors' training in grief counseling influenced their perceived competence to cope with death. Using a cross-sectional, correlational design, we sought to address the following research questions: (1) Does grief and

loss training predict school counselors' coping with death competence above and beyond loss of a family member as a child, loss of a family member as an adult, and years of experience as a school counselor? (2) Do school counselors' perceived coping with death competence differ according to school counselors' dedicated grief coursework compared to other grief and loss training?

Participants and Procedures

After receiving approval from the institutional review board, 7,500 school counselors who met the following inclusion criteria were invited to participate in an online survey via Qualtrics: (a) lived in the United States, (b) were 18 years of age or older, and (c) were certified as a school counselor in their state. Using the tailored design method for survey research (Dillman, D., 1999), we contacted school counselors who were employed across four states (i.e., Missouri, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia) via email. Geographic regions were chosen based on the United States (US) Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM)'s classification of regions of northeastern states, which comprise 20 states (U.S., n.d.a.) and 11 southeastern (U.S., n.d.b.) states. The four states were then chosen based on their state school-counselor ratio, with these states most closely aligning with ASCA's (n.d.a.) recommended 250:1 student-counselor ratio. Upon receiving an email invitation outlining the purpose of the study and the nature of participation, participants completed the survey using an enclosed hyperlink. The first page of the survey contained the informed consent document, and participants indicated their consent by continuing participation. Of the 7,500, 597 participants completed the survey, with a response rate of 12.5%. After removing 100 due to incomplete survey data, missing data (*n* =100), and univariate outliers (*n* = 9), 468 participants were retained in the analysis.

Of the 468 participants, 403 identified as White (86.1%), 48 as Black/African-American (10.3%), 4 as Biracial/Multi-racial (0.9%), 4 as Hispanic or Latino (0.9%), 2 as Middle Eastern or North African (0.4%), 1 as American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.2%), 1 as Asian (0.2%), 2 as other (0.4%), and 3 participants did not disclose their race/ethnicity (0.6%). Most participants (n = 404; 86.1) identified as female, with 59 participants identifying as male (12.9%), 3 participants as non-binary (0.6%), 1 participant preferred to self-describe (0.2%), and 1 participant preferred not to answer (0.2%). On average, participants were approximately 43.06 years old (M = 43.06, SD = 10.10), with ages ranging between 22 and 77. The majority of participants reported their highest level of education as a Master's degree (n = 396, 84.6%), while 45 participants had an Educational Specialist degree (9.6%), and 23 (4.9%) reported a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) or Doctor of Education (Ed.D), and two reporting as other (0.4%) and three participants declined to report their highest educational attainment. On average, participants had approximately 12 years of experience (M = 12.21, SD = 8.5), with years of experience ranging from 0 to 38.

In terms of grief and loss, personal experiences with loss were reported by all participants. Of the 468 participants, 328 (70.1%) reported experiencing the death of a family member as a

child, while 430 (91.9%) reported experiencing the death of a loved one as an adult. Additionally, 317 participants (32.3%) experienced the loss of a meaningful person in their life as a child and 431 (92.1%) experienced the death of a meaningful person in their life as an adult. Moreover, participants were also asked about their grief and loss training in their master's level program. Of the 468, 247 participants (52.8%) reported some form of grief and loss training in their master's programming, with 84 (17.9%) reporting that grief and loss was integrated into multiple courses, 78 (16.7%) had a required grief and loss course, 34 participants (7.3%) completed a grief and loss elective course, 30 (6.4%) had a trauma course that included grief and loss, and 34 (7.3%) answered other. There were 206 (44%) participants who reported no grief and loss training in their master's curriculum.

Instruments

Demographic Questionnaire

We developed a 13-item demographic questionnaire that consisted of items related to racial identity, gender identity, age, highest educational attainment, years of experience as a school counselor, personal experiences with loss, and experience with grief and loss training. Demographic data provides critical insight into individual differences that may influence coping with death competence. A focus on school counselors specifically, without combining other counseling professionals, collects data across these variables such as grief and loss training related to competence, while also accounting for other personal or professional characteristics.

Coping with Death-Short Version

The Coping with Death Scale -Short Version (CDS-SV; Galiana et al., 2019) is a nine-item, self-report scale designed to measure attitudes, beliefs, and skills for facing death across two dimensions, Coping with Death for Self and Coping with Death for Others. The CDS-SV was developed from the CDS (Bugen, 1980-1981) by retaining nine of the original items and summing them to develop a total score. The CDS was originally developed for palliative care professionals after participating in a death education program to assess the effectiveness and benefits of the program. Using a Likert-type response format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), respondents indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement. Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived coping with death competence. Prior research reported Cronbach's alpha as .85 for the CDS-SV total score. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .87. By measuring key aspects of coping with death competence, the CDS-SV helps identify areas where additional training or supervision may be needed, thereby enhancing counselor effectiveness and student outcomes in death-related school counseling contexts.

Data Analysis

Prior to the analysis, data were screened for missing values, normality, outliers, linearity, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, and homogeneity of variance. Six cases were found to be incomplete and were removed from the data set. Other missing values accounted for less than

5% of this data and were missing completely at random according to Little's MCAR Test (χ^2 (5285) =5253.63, p = .61. Thus, we utilized multiple imputations to replace the missing values and used the fifth iteration of data in all analyses. To assess the normality of CDS-SV scores, we inspected the histogram, Q-Q plot, and skewness and kurtosis values, and data were distributed normally. The boxplot revealed nine univariate outliers that appeared to be influential to these data; thus, all nine outliers were removed. Thus, they were retained in the analysis. After performing a chi-square test with Mahalanobis distance, we found no multivariate outliers in these data. Scatterplots showed linear relationships between the variables of interest, and variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance estimates indicated that multicollinearity was not present (VIF < 10, tolerance > .1). We used Levene's Test for Equality of Variance to assess homogeneity of variance, which was not statistically significant (F = .20, p = .65), indicating equal variances could be assumed.

To address our first research question, we used a hierarchical linear regression to examine whether experience with grief and loss training predicted school counselors' perceived coping with death competence above and beyond loss of a family member as a child, loss of a family member as an adult, and years of experience as a school counselor. We entered the loss of a family member as a child and loss of a family member as an adult, which were binary variables, in Block 1 to control for personal loss experiences. In Block 2, we entered years of experience as a professional counselor to control for professional experience. In Block 3, we entered the binary variable indicating if they had grief and loss training during their Master's counseling program. Finally, we entered the coping with death total score as the criterion variable.

To address our second research question, we performed an independent sample t-test to examine the mean differences in perceived coping with death competence according to whether participants participated in a required grief and loss course. We coded grief and loss training experiences into two groups according to whether they participated in any dedicated grief and loss coursework (e.g., required or elective; n = 112) or whether they reported other grief and loss training experiences, which included grief and loss coursework embedded in other required courses (n = 148). We used Hedge's g to estimate effect size due to disparities in cell sizes.

Positionality Statement

The research team is comprised of three counselor educators, all with varying degrees of experience with grief and loss work. All of the authors identify as White females, which was predominantly represented in our sample. Two of the authors identify as school counselors, and one counselor educator identifies as a clinical mental health counselor. All of the authors currently teach Master's school counseling students. Additionally, all authors have professional experiences supporting students or counseling clients through loss experiences. Lastly, all of the authors have personal experiences of loss that shape their worldview and conceptualization of

the study. The first author is a content expert in grief and loss work in school counseling. Her interests in grief and loss are informed by her own experiences with grief and direct school counseling work with students. As former practitioners and current counselor educators, we hold beliefs in the value of evidence-based practices to inform equity-driven school counseling. While quantitative research is data driven and rooted in objectivity, we recognize that our worldview and backgrounds inevitably influence the research questions posed and prioritize, and the populations we seek to understand. It is likely that our experiences with grief and loss personally and professionally shaped our demographic protocol, the instruments selected, and the hypotheses in our model. They also are embedded in our interpretation of the data, the implications we offer for practitioners, and our understanding of the limitations of this study.

Results

To answer our first research question, we conducted a study to examine the contributions of participating in grief and loss training on school counselors' perceived abilities to cope with death, after controlling for their personal loss experiences and years of experience as a school counselor. Specifically, our first research question was: Does grief and loss training predict school counselors' coping with death competence above and beyond loss of a family member as a child, loss of a family member as an adult, and years of experience as a school counselor? Personal loss of a family member as a child and personal loss of a family member as an adult were entered at Block 1, and this model was statistically significant ($F(2, 449) = 3.16$, $p = .04$) and accounted for 12% of the variance in coping with death competence ($R^2 = .12$, $p < 01$). The statistically significant beta coefficient in the model was loss of a family member as an adult ($\beta = .12$, $p = .01$). Years of experience as a school counselor ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$) was entered at Block 2, and this model was statistically significant ($F(3, 448) = 7.77$, $p < .001$) and accounted for an additional 10% of the variance in coping with death competence. Finally, whether they participated in grief and loss training in their Master's program was entered at Block 3. This model was statistically significant ($F(4, 447) = 10.97$, $p < .001$), and the final model accounted for 30% of the variance in coping with death competence ($R^2 = .30$, $p < 01$). Receiving grief and loss training during their Master's program ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) was predictive of coping with death competence scores above and beyond personal loss experiences and years of experience as a school counselor. For every one unit increase in grief and loss training, there is a .20 increase in coping with death competence scores.

To answer our second research question, we performed an independent sample t-test to determine if there were statistically significant differences in school counselors' perceived ability to cope with death according to whether they participated in a dedicated grief and loss course, which included required or elective coursework, compared to other grief and loss training experiences, which included grief and loss training infused in other content areas. Specifically, our second research question was: Do school counselors' perceived coping with death competence differ according to school counselors' dedicated grief coursework compared

to other grief and loss training? Results indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference in school counselors' perceptions of coping with death competence when they participated in a grief and loss course during their master's program (M = 50.10, SD = 7.79) compared to other grief and loss training (M = 51.78, SD = 7.34), t(258) = -1.79, p = .08001, g = .22.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix for Regression Variables

	CDS-SV	Child Family Loss	Adult Family Loss	Years of SC Experience	Grief and Loss Training
CDS-SV	1				
Child Family Loss	-0.03	1			
Adult Family Loss	.11*	.13*	1		
Years of SC Experience	.20*	-0.06	.14*	1	
Grief and Loss Training	.23*	0.04	0.08	.12*	1

Note. *p <.05; CDS-SV = Coping with death competence total score; Child Family Loss = Loss of a family member as a child; Adult Family Loss = Loss of a family member as an adult; Grief and Loss Training = Training in Grief and Loss during Master's program.

Table 2

Hierarchical Linear Regression Variables Predicting Coping with Death Competence

Variable	*F*	*df*	*p*	R^2	*SE*	*Δ R2*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Model 1	3.16	(2, 449)	0.04	0.01	6.15	0.01			
Child Family Loss							-0.67	0.85	-0.04
Adult Family Loss							3.48	1.41	0.12*
Model 2	7.77	(3, 448)	<.001	0.22	8.01	0.04			
Child Family Loss							-0.35	0.84	-0.02
Adult Family Loss							2.57	1.40	0.09
Years of SC Experience							0.18	0.05	0.19*
Model 3	10.97	(4, 447)	<.001	0.30	7.85	0.04			
Child Family Loss							-0.50	0.82	-0.03
Adult Family Loss							2.21	1.38	0.07
Years of SC Experience							0.16	0.04	0.17*

Grief and Loss Training	3.32	0.75	0.20 *

Note. *p <.05; CDS-SV = Coping with death competence total score; Child Family Loss = Loss of a family member as a child; Adult Family Loss = Loss of a family member as an adult; Grief and Loss Training = Training in Grief and Loss during Master's program.

Discussion

This study explored relationships between school counselors' perceived ability to cope with death as it related to the school counselor's own grief and loss experiences, years of experience as a school counselor, and training in their master's program in grief and loss. We found a statistically significant relationship between coping with death competence and experiencing the personal loss of a family member as a child and personal loss of a family member as an adult. While our study differed from previous studies conducted that found no statistical significance, (Breen 2010-2011; Deffenbaugh, 2008; Ober et al. 2012), the contrasting outcome could be attributed to different methodologies or the specifics of the type of death experienced as a child or adult. For example, Ober et al. 2012 utilized the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG) in their study of 369 counselors, whereas Breen 2010-2011's qualitative study was completed in Western Australia and Deffenbaugh's qualitative study focused on LPCs in Ohio. These differences between methodologies, geographic regions, and counseling specialization could all contribute to the varying results. Our study chose to utilize the CDS-SV due to its focus on assessing how well a counselor can cope with death-related situations, based on personal views and how to comfort grieving individuals (Gailana et al., 2019), while the TRIG is not focused on the ability to support others through grief but on an individual's past and present personal grief journey (Faschingbauer et al., 1987).

Secondly, we found a statistically significant relationship between coping with death competence and years of experience as a school counselor. This result differs from previous literature, which found no significant relationship (Ober et al., 2012) and a negative relationship (Deffenbaugh, 2008) between years of experience and grief competence. Ober et al. (2012) utilized the Grief Counseling Experience and Training Survey (GCETS) to measure both years of experience and training. The GCETS does not measure participants emotional responses or how personally comfortable they are with grief-related situations (Kaplow et al., 2014); therefore, the CDS-SV's focus on the personal aspects of coping with grief was chosen for this study to determine how effectively school counselors can address grief and loss (Galiana et al., 2019).

Our last variable for research question one was regarding the relationship between coping with death and receiving grief and loss training in master's programs, which was statistically significant. Receiving grief and loss training during their Master's program was predictive of coping with death competence, which aligns with previous studies (Harrawood et al., 2011; Ober et al., 2012) and found significance between grief and loss training and grief competence.

While each of those studies were not solely focused on school counselors, it does indicate the need for school counselors to be trained in grief and loss during their master's program. For our final research question, which is also related to grief and loss training, we found that there is not a statistically significant difference between a master's course in grief and loss and other training a counselor receives as it pertains to grief competence.

Implications

This study offers several important implications for school counselor education, professional practice, and future research. Existing literature has proposed various strategies for integrating grief and loss education throughout the CACREP core curriculum (Hartman & Brown, 2024; Horn et al., 2013; Stargell et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2023). In practice, numerous interventions, such as utilizing MTSS, developing school-wide bereavement plans, and pursuing additional professional development through organizations like ASCA, can guide school counselors in recognizing and supporting grieving students. As school counselors increasingly encounter students experiencing grief, evidence-based interventions can serve as critical tools for meeting students' emotional and developmental needs. Finally, there are opportunities for expanding the research base to deepen understanding of grief and its application within counselor preparation programs and school-based settings. The following recommendations highlight how counselor educators, practitioners, and researchers can more effectively support students navigating grief and loss.

School Counselor Education

First, school counselor educators should consider ways to integrate grief and loss curriculum within training programs. Whether embedded across the core curriculum (e.g. Hartman & Brown, 2024; Horn et al., 2013; Stargell et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2023), in a trauma or crisis course (Montague et al., 2020), or as a dedicated course, the considerations for addressing grief and loss should be discussed.

Within school counseling curriculum, the MTSS process is one that can be utilized to serve students who are grieving and can be introduced within the school counseling training program. As previously discussed, grief and loss can be introduced through the use of the MTSS process, which can contribute to the comfortability of how to implement grief and loss interventions within the school setting. Additionally, as DeMuth et al.'s (2020) study noted, a formal grief plan is a resource that school counselors-in-training can utilize in learning the MTSS process. An example of a resource for this formalized grief plan is from the National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG), which provides a free resource titled Individual Student Bereavement Support Plan (https://nacg.org/isbsp/) to equip school personnel to help a student who has suffered a death loss (NACG, 2023). This individualized plan provides a variety of strategies across multiple areas to support the student as they re-integrate into the school environment (NACG, 2023). By

implementing a formal bereavement plan, it aids the student with the return and reintegration into school, as well as implementing support over time (Dyregrov et al., 2020).

School Counseling Practice

School counselors with extensive professional experience can contribute meaningfully to the development of tiered supports within a MTSS framework by applying their knowledge of student grief responses acquired through years of practice. As previously discussed, experienced school counselors are particularly well-suited to lead the design and implementation of Tier one interventions, which focus on proactive, school-wide strategies. These universal supports aim to foster a grief-sensitive environment and ensure that all students have access to developmentally appropriate resources and support following a death loss within the school community.

An additional avenue to ensure students get the care they need is to become a *Grief Sensitive School,* whose aim is to cultivate a grief-sensitive school climate to proactively normalize grief, reduce stigma, and ensure that all students receive access to developmentally appropriate education and emotional support during times of bereavement (New York Life Foundation, n.d.). As previously mentioned, these impactful personal experiences can spur the desire for systemic change, including the development of grief education initiatives and school-wide bereavement protocols in an effort to create emotionally supportive environments (Doka, 2005; Servaty-Seib & Corr, 2010).

ASCA provides a Grief and Loss Specialist training that school counseling students or professionals can complete to gain knowledge and skills related to grief and loss (ASCA, n.d.b.). This training, which is online and self-paced, informs participants through knowing the developmental needs of children and adolescents, as well as how to serve students on both individual and school-wide levels. Graduate programs and districts can utilize this resource as a professional development opportunity for school counselors-in-training and professional school counselors, to increase the process for identifying, developing, and implementing grief and loss interventions for students.

School Counseling Grief Research

This study highlights important opportunities for advancing grief research in school counseling. First, it underscores the need for more empirical investigation into how school counselors' training backgrounds, personal experiences with loss, and depth of knowledge about grief influence their approaches to supporting students who are grieving.

Secondly, this study suggests systemic variables influencing grief responses within MTSS warrant further analysis. While MTSS has been applied to grief and loss within the literature (Blueford et al., 2021b; Ziomek-Daigle, 2017) and specific bereavement accommodations (DeMuth et al.,

2020), more research can be conducted to investigate how grief is currently handled within MTSS frameworks, explore school counselor perceptions of their role in grief response, and identify the professional development needed to implement grief-sensitive MTSS effectively. For example, the *Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative* demonstrated that grief-sensitive training improved educator confidence and highlighted the importance of ongoing, culturally responsive professional development (Lively-Endicott et al., 2024). While this study was focused on all school personnel, it highlights the impact of targeted professional development. Research combining the MTSS process within grief education for school counselors can create a uniformity in the system of care that can aid students who are grieving.

Lastly, by examining systemic factors, such as administrative policies, cross-professional collaboration, and resource allocation, future research can clarify the school counselor's role and identify opportunities for targeted training in grief-informed care. This research advances the school counseling field in moving toward a more defined, impactful, and sustainable grief support systems in schools.

Limitations

One limitation of our study was this is the first known application of the CDS-SV to a counseling population, as it is historically used in healthcare settings. Due to the use of this study within school counseling, there may be limitations with its adaptation to the field. Another limitation is the demographics of our study were White and female. Although the demographics of the study are relatively representative of the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2021), research suggests that cultural groups vary in their perceptions of grief and loss experiences, and some groups may have earlier and more collective loss experiences (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Therefore, results may not be as generalizable to school counselors who identify with a different gender or ethnic minority identities. Future research should focus on topics of grief and loss with School Counselors of Color and other historically underrepresented identities to better understand the results of the study.

Due to the disparity between studies, additional research is warranted to better understand personal loss as it relates to grief competence. Future research could also examine types of loss (e.g. parent, sibling, extended family) as it relates to grief and loss competence for school counselors. For both studies, the populations were LPCs instead of school counselors, which could contribute to the differences due to counseling specialization. This study highlights a need for more research surrounding years of experience as a school counselor as it relates to grief and loss competence. Future research studies could explore how school counseling experience impacts grief and loss competence. This indicates that having a grief and loss course embedded within the masters curriculum provides a depth of understanding that is indicative of school counselors perceived competence.

Lastly, the current study used a correlational design that assumes linearity to investigate the variables under study. Conceptually, grief is considered to be nonlinear and can be prolonged, complicated, and cumulative (Hewson et al., 2024; Neimeyer, 2016; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Thus, future research designs that use nonlinear approaches or investigate grief longitudinal may extend the results of the study.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to determine how school counselors' training in grief counseling influenced their perceived competence to cope with death above and beyond loss of a family member as a child, loss of a family member as an adult, and years of experience as a school counselor. We also explored if there were differences between a required grief and loss course with other specific grief training. Participants indicated that there were significant relationships between the variables, demonstrating that personal loss of a family member, either as a child or adult, years of experience as a school counselor, and training in grief and loss all demonstrated statistical significance. Additionally, a grief and loss course in a master's program was an indicator of greater grief competence than other training related to grief and loss. As school counselors play an integral role in students who experience grief and loss, it is vital that school counselors have the requisite knowledge and skills to provide this specialized support.

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A *PSC Emerging Scholars Program* Action Research Study: From "Navigating" to "Dismantling and Reimagining" Academia

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Abstract

This is the final paper in the 2025 Special Issue for the inaugural PSC Emerging Scholars; here we unpack an action research study, where we examine three years' worth of data and process, to understand the processes and outcomes of this one-of-a-kind research mentoring program that centers (a) emerging scholars; (b) those who have been practicing school counselors, and (c) identify as being from a historically marginalized group. Results included a prioritization of research, community, and shifting from navigating to dismantling and reimagining academia. Aligned with an action research lens, the paper concludes with recommendations for the second cohort, which is in development.

Introduction

This paper serves as the conclusion to the 2025 *Professional School Counseling* Emerging Scholars special issue. To echo the Introduction to this special issue (Steen et al., 2025), K-12 education maintains patterns of systemic inequities, racism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression, most often impacting individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, those who are members of global majority communities (e.g., BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and others (Kosciw, et al., 2015; Skiba, et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2025a). In fact, systemic inequities have been further on display within the current wave of anti-DEI sentiments across the country, targeting K-12 schools in particular (Goodman-Scott et al., 2025). We also know that our students most harmed in schools benefit to the greatest extent, when their identities are mirrored in their educators, offering not only role modeling, but adults in school buildings who have lived and thus understand and ground their work in the nuances of students' cultures (Villegas et al., 2012).

Despite the crucial importance of having a range of identities represented in K-12 educators, the U.S. continues to miss the mark. While those in the global majority communities makes up the largest percentage of students' race/ethnicity demographics in the country (55%), the teacher representation is much lower (20%), demonstrating the significant disproportionality in teacher race/ethnicity representation (Table 1) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2025a).

Table 1.
U.S. Teacher vs. Student Race/Ethnicity Percentage

Race/Ethnicity	Student %	Teacher %	Summary
White	45%	80%	White: 45% Students 80% Teachers
Hispanic	29%	9%	Global Majority: 55% Students 20% Teachers
Black/African American	15%	6%	
Asian	5%	2%	
2 or More Races	5%	2%	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	<1%	
Pacific Islander	1%	<.5	

This lack of educational staff representation is not reserved exclusively for teachers, but is also seen across school counseling practitioners and faculty (i.e., school counselors and school counselor educators, respectively) (Betters-Bubon, et al., 2021; Lee & Lemberger-Truelove, 2024). School counselors are master's-trained professionals with an identity in both mental health counseling and education (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021), aspiring to serve students' academic, career, and social/emotional needs through a comprehensive school counseling program (i.e., the ASCA National Model [American School Counselor Association, 2019]).

Many would argue that a cornerstone of the school counseling profession is the commitment to social justice, diversity, equity and inclusion: advocating for systemic change, such as the removal of systemic barriers impeding students' equitable access to opportunities and achievement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). However, as noted above, one enormous barrier is the ongoing lack of representation in the field of school counseling: for school counseling practitioners in schools, for pre-service school counselor trainees within masters counselor preparation programs and the doctoral training pipeline, and school counselor educators. To

combat this dilemma directly, the PSC Emerging Scholars program, described in a later section, was created.

School Counselor Education Pipeline

In recent years, scholars have discussed the importance of centering the voices, narratives, and representation of identities within the school counselor pipeline. In their conceptual article, Lopez-Perry and colleagues (2021) called for greater racial/ethnic diversity in school counselor education graduate programs, to combat K-12 systemic inequities and injustices, such as the lack of BIPOC school counselors. They detailed the *Social Justice Recruitment and Retention Model,* an innovative approach for recruiting and retaining school counselor education doctoral students within doctoral programs. This framework from Lopez-Perry et al (2021) was grounded in Critical Race Theory (Hiraldo, 2010) and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model: (a) acknowledging and dismantling structural barriers impeding school counselor education recruitment and retention, and (b) highlighting BIPOC school counselor educator doctoral students' cultural strengths and assets throughout the program.

In addition to Lopez-Perry et al (2021), other scholars have reinforced the importance of school counselor educators/doctoral students having a strongly held identity and practicing experience in school counseling experience. For instance, in their phenomenology, Betters-Bubon and colleagues (2022) reported that participating school counselor educators emphasized *school* counseling as a unique discipline within the counseling discipline, yet also shared feelings of being overshadowed and minoritized within the large counseling profession, in favor of *clinical mental health* counseling.

To illustrate further, in their study examining the school counseling pipeline, Milsom and Moran (2015) relayed the increased recognition for the myriad benefits to school counselor educators having prior experience as practicing school counselors. In fact, some school counselors elect to continue working full-time, while completing their doctoral program on a part-time basis. Milsom and Moran (2015) wanted to understand the unique experiences of those transitioning from practicing school counselor to counselor education, conducting a phenomenological investigation with eight early career school counselor educators. Overall. they found that while their sample of school counselor educators adjusted well to some parts of their new faculty role (i.e., teaching and service/leadership) they struggled with their scholarship (navigating research studies and the publication process), as well as a sense of isolation, particularly with work settings that are often more diffused. Researchers recommended that, due to the unique needs of this population, mentorship and other supports are specifically tailored to the unique needs of this population.

Doctoral students and early career faculty in counselor education, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, develop their researcher and professional identities within systems shaped by inequity and structural barriers (Ngadjui et al., 2025). The transition from practitioner to researcher can be especially complex for those with a strong counseling identity, such as practicing school counselors, who may struggle to integrate or prioritize research as part of their evolving professional roles (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Lamar & Helm, 2017). Structured mentorship programs and experiences that intentionally focus on research development, providing opportunities to demystify the research process, learn about publishing, and engage in scholarly activities, are especially effective in supporting doctoral students and early career faculty as they build their research identities and navigate academic expectations (Limberg et al., 2020).

Rationale

Armed with expertise in systemic change and advocacy, the school counseling profession is perfectly poised to navigate the present chapter in the larger chronicles of U.S. K-12 education. In a recent study, school counseling district leaders (Goodman-Scott et al., 2025) discussed how they navigated the present anti-DEI landscape, including the importance of carefully examining, understanding, and then navigating within the existing systems and policies- finding ways to *continue* propelling forward work aligned with the school counseling profession, and *continue* serving students. We must do the same. In this present time, we must utilize creative strategies to *continue* to uphold our ethical standards and serve each and every student. We must *continue* to identify and disrupt inequitable and unjust systems. We must *continue* to navigate the current culture and climate of K-12 education. And we must *continue* to serve each and every student.

To *continue* this work, we are writing this paper, discussing the creation and facilitation of a program aimed at chipping away the disproportionality within practicing school counseling. Specifically, we aimed to reach this goal through addressing the practitioner pipeline, focusing on those who are preparing the next generation of practicing school counselors: school counselor educators.

In the remainder of this paper, we describe an action research investigation that unpacks the process of designing, facilitating, and evaluating the *Professional School Counseling* Emerging Scholars program. As the school counseling profession is grounded in data-driven practices (ASCA, 2019), we aimed to follow suit through the PSC Scholars program: (a) prioritizing scholarship as a guiding force in creating and implementing the program, and (b) using data and an action research lens to engage in on-going program evaluation (Creswell, 2019). As a result, this paper presents the culmination of an action research project led by the three authors, who

have also served as PSC Associate Editors (AEs), thereby facilitating the Emerging Scholars program. The following research question guided our inquiry: *What are the processes and outcomes of the PSC Emerging Scholars Program?*

Method: An Action Research Project

Through action research, scholars examine practical concerns in real-world settings, aiming to find solutions (Creswell, 2019). Thus, often used in educational settings, action research utilizes quantitative and qualitative data sources to identify challenges or needs then plan for, implement, and reflect on solutions. Further, action researchers are usually in a participatory role, involved in the educational setting or situation under consideration, which ensures their buy-in, as well as provides access. The iterative and dynamic process or action research is generally comprised of four key steps: (a) planning, (b) acting, (c) observing, and (d) reflecting (Creswell, 2019), which will be described in more depth in the following sections. Overall, action research is grounded in social change occurring in practical settings: aiming to improve educational contexts through on-going cycles of planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection. In the present study, only the qualitative data are presented to center the voices of the scholars' experiences within this program.

Positionality

As researchers are instruments of their research (Hays & Singh, 2023), scholars are responsible for acknowledging their positionality, or unique worldview and how that impacts their engagement in their investigations. While an extensive positionality is beyond the scope of this present paper, we each name key aspects of our identities, beliefs, and experiences that were influential within the present case study. All three scholars: (a) are full professors specializing in school counseling; (b) were practicing school counselors previously and value that component of their professional identity; and (c) are committed to social justice, equity, and a critical ecological perspective in K-12 schools, to remove systemic barriers so all students can be successful in school and life.

Goodman-Scott is a white cisgender female; she experienced the initial challenges of transitioning from practicing school counselor to faculty member, particularly in developing a professional network and research successes, though also recognizing her points of access and privilege due to her personal identities. For over a decade, she has been a faculty member for a university that proudly identifies as a "Minority-Majority Institution" where she appreciates being in a higher education space with robust student diversity (i.e., race/ethnicity, "First-in-Family" to attend higher education, etc.). She sees first-hand, the need for greater representation in higher education faculty, across disciplines. In her work with this PSC program, she aspired to follow this quote from Lopez-Perry (2021), "While the labor of recruiting racial/ethnically diverse students into and through programs typically falls on BIPOC faculty, we specifically call on White counselor educators to lead the charge" (p. 4). Through her work

previously and presently serving schools, the community, and the school counseling profession, her aims remain focused on working toward more equitable and just schools.

The second author, Johnson identifies as African American; she is a former school counselor and current counselor educator and administrator. She has a history of and commitment to, interrogating education and healthcare systems as it relates to addressing social determinants of health needs, equity, access, and justice. Through this process, she reflected on her commitment to advancing equity, justice, and dismantling systemic barriers within educational and healthcare systems and how these priorities impact her lens as a researcher and a mentor.

The third author, Steen, identifies racially as Black and culturally as African American. As a cisgender male, Steen has at times received encouragement and other times endured skepticism when practicing as an elementary school counselor based on his Black and male identities. While pursuing a PhD in education with a specialization in counselor education, Steen worked as a high school counselor to gain more clinical experience where his maleness was more acceptable, yet being Black was sometimes seen as an asset to students and other times as a threat to parents and school staff. For nearly the past two decades, Steen has gained more influence within and beyond academia through his research, teaching and service, where he intentionally maintains a student-focused perspective, collectivist spirit, and regard for communities across racial and cultural spectrums of identity. Aligned with the current PSC Emerging Scholars program, Steen intentionally seeks to engage mentors with an openness to expanding what research means honoring those who have modeled these dispositions for him in the past.

Context

In recent years, ASCA has held School Counselor Educator Summits, in which school counseling faculty attend a multi-day meeting, similar to an advisory, to discuss the state of the school counseling profession and provide recommendations. During this summit in November 2021, attendees discussed barriers to the lack of representation of diverse identities in the profession, including school counseling practitioners, pre-service graduate students, and school counselor educators (A. Hickman, personal communication, June 05, 2025). In the months after this summit, Goodman-Scott and Johnson approached ASCA staff; they relayed that in reflecting on content from the summit and recommendations in the literature (i.e., Lopez-Perry et al., 2021; Milsom & Moran, 2015), they successfully proposed the PSC Emerging Scholars Program. With ASCA's support, Goodman-Scott and Johnson became Associate Editors (AEs) of the PSC Emerging Scholars Program, for ASCA's *Professional School Counseling* journal (PSC). They designed and began facilitating this two-year program in 2022, with a cohort of ten early career school counselor education scholars. The PSC Emerging Scholars program went through several changes over its first iteration, such as changing leadership (i.e., Dr. Johnson stepping down due

to an exciting job promotion and welcoming the addition of Dr. Steen as an AE), and moving from a two-year to a three-year program at the Scholars' request, which included adding a PSC journal special issue component to the program).

Action Research Phase 1: Planning

For the first step in action research, investigators identify challenges or concerns (i.e., detailed in our Literature Review, Rationale, and Context) (Creswell, 2019). Also in the *Planning* phase, researchers begin preparing for the intervention, as noted below.

Goals

In response to the needs in the profession, we developed goals to drive the PSC Emerging Scholars program. Mainly, we aimed to engage in the national recruitment and the selection of a cohort of approximately 10 early career school counselor education scholars, to create the inaugural cohort (i.e. Cohort 1) of the PSC Emerging Scholars program. As a result of the program, and in collaboration with the Scholars, we aspired to: (a) increase PSC Emerging Scholars' research exposure and experiences; (b) develop a community within the cohort; and (c) discuss the culture of academia. Application requirements were: (a) each applicant had paid experience as practicing school counselors and were representing identities historically marginalized in academia; and (b) at the time of their application, applicants were either a doctoral student or early career counselor educator, specializing in school counseling.

Recruitment and Selection

In alignment with the program goals, we solidified a process and timeline for recruitment, selection, and on-boarding. First, we marketed the program through national channels (i.e., email listservs and social media). Prospective applicants engaged in a multi-step application process that included: (a) completing an online application with demographic questions, as well as short-answer responses (to understand their desires and interests surrounding the program); (b) the AEs screening applications; (c) interview occurred via zoom; (d) finally: selection! Select marketing materials included:

"Each Emerging Scholar will participate in a two-year cohort. During this time, their commitment includes approximately 3-5 hours a month (during the academic year), including (a) a two-hour meeting each month, and (b) at times reading, groupwork, and editorial review-work outside of meetings."

Content

When we initially started the cohort, the structure included a two-hour zoom meeting each month of the academic school year, over the span of the two-year cohort. At the onset, our content goals were as follows: Year one: community building within the cohort and outside of the cohort; strategies for navigating academia; and increased knowledge on quantitative and

qualitative data methods. Year two: we aimed to spend time reviewing articles together, as part of the PSC review process. The focus of our content was multi-pronged: to demystify the peer-review process and strengthen research exposure and experiences.

Program Evaluation

As part of the *Planning*, we determined strategies for program evaluation, such as the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative data: (a) pre/posttests to understand baseline and growth, utilizing validated measures related to research experience, comfort, and self-efficacy; (b) qualitative data sources included: application, pre/post focus groups at the start of year one and the end of year two, reflection forms (i.e., anonymous Google Forms where Scholars shared feedback after meetings), and (c) facilitator planning documents and notes. We submitted this program evaluation and corresponding research project for IRB approval.

Action Research Phase 2: Acting

In the *Acting* phase, researchers implement the intervention or practice being studied (Creswell, 2019).

On-boarding

This cohort was nationally marketed (spring 2022), and resulted in the selection of ten emerging scholars (doctoral students or new faculty) in May 2022 who had previous school counseling experiences, and long-term aspirations of being school counselor educators within academia. This cohort began August 2022 and initially had plans to conclude June 2024. Recruitment resulted in ~40 complete applications; all 10 individuals who were invited to join the cohort accepted.

Next, we requested varied information, including contact information, availability, professional headshots and bios, and shared data collection procedures, as part of program evaluation. We also shared a directory and created a common group chat/thread. Mainly, we relayed that, similar to running a comprehensive school counseling program, as scholars, we desired to engage in program evaluation, to guide the PSC Emerging Scholars program. We shared that we would be using a range of documents in this program evaluation (listed above). In addition to program evaluation, PSC Scholars were given informed consent and asked to decide whether or not to give permission to us to use their program evaluation data as part of a study, for eventual publication. We shared that participation of their program evaluation data was voluntary and would not impact their participation in the cohort. Thus, cohort members independently decided if they were comfortable with their program evaluation content being included as part of the present action research study.

Content

At the beginning of the cohort, Dr. Goodman-Scott and Dr. Johnson created a schedule of monthly meetings, providing content aligned with program goals (see the *Planning* description). We also prioritized following the "here and now" of the group process. Thus, we wanted the program to meet the needs of the Scholars, and to follow their lead. As a result, we opened each meeting asking the Scholars: *What do you need and what do you want from today's session?* While we had content prepared (i.e., the peer-review process), if the Scholars brought up needs (i.e., an upcoming job interview, dissertation defense, or invited speaking), we shifted our focus for the meeting. We wanted the program to be practical, meaningful, and to center the Scholars. As time went on, Scholars increasingly drove the "agenda" of the meetings.

As such, as we were in the final semester of the two-year program, and when we asked the Scholars about needs: they shared that publishing was the largest source of social capital in academia. They also noted that while they had gained community and mentorship, as well as research exposure and skills, what they needed most at that juncture was experience publishing. From these recommendations, we approached ASCA and proposed (a) a special issue of PSC for the Emerging Scholars, and (b) adding a third year to the program. Mainly, that the third year would be spent engaging in the writing and peer-review process with Drs. Steen and Goodman-Scott serving as special issue editors as well as mentors and supports for the Scholars' writing process, as needed/desired. With this approval from all parties, we changed course and moved the program to three years.

Other topics that came up, generated from Scholars, during meetings:

- Authentic conversations to explore challenges in academia: how to advocate for systemic change; when/how to navigate the system to gain access/power/privilege in the system; when to resist; and when to leave.
- Research-related content and activities to deepen the sense of community and researcher experiences and exposure.
- Our conversations about scholarship were varied, such as: peer-review process; authorship; what "counts" as scholarship. For instance, discussing the realities of biases in peer-review (including reviewers and editors), and concerns with the erasure of scholarly voice. Thus, deciding when and how to make changes to a paper, compared to challenging feedback, compared to moving to a different journal.
- The job search and navigating politics in universities, departments, and programs. We also aimed to normalize the variety of paths available to Scholars after completing a doctorate- that Scholars may decide to pursue a faculty position, and they may also decide on alternatives to the academy. In discussing resisting and pushing against the status quo, this means *they* get to decide on their career trajectory and that the Scholars are not bound to academic positions that cause harm, nor are they bound to the academia. Completing a PhD opens the doors to

other professional options, from consulting and training, to school counseling leadership in school districts.
- Invited a panel of school counselor educators, including representation of many identities

Celebrating and Closure

The very act of changing the structure of the Emerging Scholars program was an act of resisting and reimagining the system in place: adding a third year and a special issue. Wrapped in with that, was highlighting the Scholars, to elevate their scholarship, not only through the publication of the journal, but also at ASCA's annual conference as well as their email communication and social media.

Action Research Phase 3: Observing

In the *Observing* phase of action research, scholars engage in data collection and analysis, to increase their understanding of the impact and process of their program (Creswell, 2019). To engage in *observing* in the present study, we utilized the following data sources: the Scholars application (i.e., questions open-ended about related motivation and experiences), focus groups completed with the group of Scholars (i.e., at the start of the first year and end of the second year), as well as observations, the program syllabus, reflection/feedback forms completed by Scholars, and observations from the program.

In regard to qualitative data analysis, we engaged in open coding for each data source, organized data in a codebook, sought major themes within data through categorical aggregation, and identified patterns among categories (Creswell, 2019). Next, Hays and Singh (2023) recommended that when facilitating qualitative research, scholars use multiple verification, or trustworthiness strategies to maximize the rigor of the study. We used several strategies to increase the trustworthiness of this action research study. For accuracy, we facilitated member checking by sending and requesting feedback regarding interview transcripts. We also triangulated data across participants and across a multitude of data sources, through the use of prolonged engagement over a three-year span. Further, we completed field notes and an audit trail to document data collection, participant communication, and research processes. Finally, we engaged in researcher triangulation and consensus coding across scholars, as well as the use of a thick description to communicate findings, including the use of direct quotations.

As a result of our data analysis, we determined three primary themes and corresponding subthemes that provided rich descriptions of the PSC Emerging Scholars program. Specifically, the primary themes are: (1) purposefully prioritizing research; (2) community focus: affirming and empowering intersectional identities; and (3) the push and pull of dismantling while reimagining.

Theme 1: Purposefully Prioritizing Research

Grounded in scholarship (i.e., Lopez-Perry et al. 2021; Milsom & Moran, 2015) and professional recommendations, a substantial goal of this program was to increase research exposure and experiences. Throughout the first theme, the Scholars expressed research as a driving force for them applying to be a PSC Scholar, their growth as a result of the program, and how they conceptualized research to propel forward their commitment to social justice and equity. These results were relayed in the following subthemes: (a) desiring research exposure and experience; (b) describing how they gained research supports; and (c) research as a tool for advocacy.

Subtheme 1A: Desiring Research Exposure and Experience. Early in the cohort process, the PSC Scholars shared their desire for greater exposure and experience with scholarly research. For instance, one Scholar shared: "my self-efficacy as a researcher is developing. Engaging with the PSC Emerging Scholars Program will support me as I improve my self-efficacy in research while also increasing research quality across the school counseling profession." Another communicated, "when I learned of the [PSC Scholars] program, I was immediately drawn to the opportunity to learn more about the publication process, collaborate with professionals who have contributed to the field, and receive mentorship support in developing quality research that will further our profession. My goal is to create research that is useful and accessible to practicing school counselors. I believe that participation in the ASCA Emerging Scholars program would broaden my skill set as a researcher and future counselor educator."

The Scholars also shared specific aspects of scholarship they sought to bolster, such as researcher identity and developing a long-term and fundable research line; practical strategies for research design; as well as how to collaborate with others around research (e.g., authorship, navigating group projects, research across institutions, and running research teams). In addition, the Scholars desired concrete information on the publishing process; some examples from Scholars included: "publishing your dissertation, quality writing, templates for publications;" "publication process;" and "responding to reviewer feedback."

Subtheme 1B: Gaining Research Supports. Throughout the cohort process and toward the end of the formal meetings, the Scholars communicated their appreciation for the research-specific supports they gained. For instance, they reported increased exposure to scholarly activities such as submitting an article for peer-review, and applying for a grant. They also highlighted the benefits of having a community to celebrate scholarly accomplishments. Examples of Scholars relaying their good news included: "I defended and it's done. Definitely a big celebration!;" "I am presenting a poster presentation at ACEs of my dissertation study;" and sharing that they "started my first faculty job. So that is a celebration. It's been good, I love my students. I am very thankful."

In addition to celebrating scholarly accomplishments with fellow cohort members, the Scholars also explained that as a result of this cohort experience, their research endeavors were bolstered. At monthly meetings, the Scholars would often tell each other about the research projects they were working on, including dissertation proposals and defenses, thus receiving scholarly support and encouragement. For example, one Scholar lamented to the group finding it challenging to build momentum in their writing, but voiced their commitment to work through the barriers, reinforcing goals:, "I need to start working on my dissertation manuscript." In a similar vein, they developed *accountability partners*, relying on others in the cohort with whom they could share research goals, and also follow-up on progress. A Scholar noted the importance of "community and writing" being intertwined, naming a fellow cohort member as "he is my person in my cohort. We hold each other down. I'm like, 'All right, we doing this? Let's get its.'" In another example of scholarly accountability through relationship, one Scholar created a weekly writing time: sending a calendar invite and zoom link to the entire cohort, including mentors, for a time each week in which she'd log-onto a quiet "zoom room," and write quietly for two-hours, offering for others to join the zoom link at any time to also quietly write. As she said, "creating the writing group was huge for me 'cause it gave me a steady space to ask questions, to learn from each other, be able to do some writing, and have some accountability."

Subtheme 1C: Research as a Tool for Advocacy. Overall, the PSC Scholars shared their professional commitment to advocacy and social justice, and valued using research to enhance this emphasis. In this robust subtheme, many Scholars appreciated "research being used for advocacy." As such, several Scholars desired to participate in the PSC Scholars program to not only deepen their research skills, but as a mechanism to propel forward advocacy and social justice efforts. For instance, "my research interests in school counseling practice with culturally and linguistically diverse students are my most potent form of advocacy as a social justice change agent. The Emerging Scholars Program will facilitate my development and engagement in meaningful outcome research to diversify the academic pipeline across school counseling." Similarly, a Scholar shared their motivation for utilizing research for advocacy, "my innate desire to create safe, equitable, and just educational experiences for Black children led me to pursue my doctoral degree. The current research about working with these populations is often deficit-based and wrapped in whiteness, leading to further harm. As a doctoral student and future researcher/scholar, I am excited to initiate projects that center, empower, and uplift marginalized youths…. Practicing school counselors desire to see themselves and their students in the research."

Along these lines, according to one Scholar, "as a 'first-generation-everything-person,' I understand the unique challenges of being a first-generation college student and a first-generation doctoral student in a community where I am one of few that look like me. I also understand the complexity of intersectionality as it relates to people with marginalized identities and their experiences in the world. My interest in the PSC Emerging Scholars program

goes beyond simply amplifying the voices of marginalized people in literature. Allyship is a common term in the conversation surrounding social justice and equity work, but allyship is passive. My hope is that the PSC Emerging Scholars program will not simply be an ally but an accomplice that will work alongside me to transform the world of academia into one that positions marginalized people to lead and transform the world as a whole."

Related comments highlighted the Scholars' commitment to breaking down barriers, especially pertaining to access, "I am a first-generation Latina student; my mother and father immigrated" and their desire to "utilize research to understand the generational wealth and social capital of Latina/o students. The Professional School Counseling Emerging Scholars Program would support my efforts to break new ground in this research space and provide an empirical foundation for future policy making." Next, a Scholar expressed their commitment to using research to transform advocacy into concrete steps supporting diverse and traditionally minoritized students, "when done through a culturally competent and anti-racist lens, research has the potential to be a form of advocacy for historically marginalized communities. I work to integrate social justice advocacy and multicultural social justice counseling competencies throughout my research interests and areas of expertise. I believe there is a need to balance micro-level practice and macro-level advocacy throughout the school counseling curriculum. Therefore, my research centers around ways to transform school counseling practice into actionable and measurable advocacy methods for culturally and linguistically diverse students."

Finally, one Scholar shared their desire to engage in "research as advocacy and provide evidence for needed change in policy, counselor training, and practice." They voiced that these efforts are especially important, as "most professional school counselors are White monolingual, middle-aged women, while the public-school population is increasingly more and more diverse. Scholars have called about counselor education programs to diversify their student body to meet this growing need."

Theme 2: Community Focus: Affirming and Empowering Intersectional Identities

Another initial goal of the PSC Scholars program was creating a sense of community, to build professional networks and decrease isolation. This second theme was especially powerful and depicts the Scholars experiencing a sense of deep and meaningful community through the PSC Scholars' program. For instance, scholars expressed gratitude for the relationships that formed out of the PSC program, using the following descriptors, "soul-affirming, connecting, rejuvenating!;" "I feel inspired and encouraged;" "I enjoyed the time to have open dialogue…. the opportunity to just chat;" "helpful, encouraging, inspiring;" as well as feeling "grateful." Intertwined throughout their discussions of enhanced community, the Scholars reflected on their intersectional identities personally and professionally. Mainly, many noted holding personal identities that have been historically marginalized in academia, which was often a driving force in their efforts to pursue a doctorate and seek a faculty position, to "advocate for

greater representation and the removal of systemic barriers for traditionally minoritized identities, within academia." As such, many Scholars seemed to appreciate the cohort as a place to build community and find commonalities across others in school counselor education with similar personal identities and professional motivations. In the second theme, which was grounded in the importance of community, we found the following subthemes: (a) gratitude for community; (b) affirming and normalizing professional transitions; (c) community providing social capital; and (d) solidarity for school counselor educator identity.

Subtheme 2A: Gratitude for Community. According to the Scholars, they found that the journey of a school counselor education doctoral student and early-career faculty member was quite isolating, especially as a member of a historically marginalized identity, with less representation in academic spaces. As a result, they appreciated building this community of other PSC Scholars, and the process of the community unfolding over several years. One Scholar was grateful to "have a group of people who understand my passions and frustrations within the field of school counseling and school counselor education." Concomitantly, Scholars noted that, "I am feeling connected and at similar places with the other cohort members;" and "I enjoyed the connection." Another Scholar said, "I love the community we've established over these last few years. It's so refreshing to be a part of a group who champions school counseling and are prepared to continue to advocate on behalf of marginalized groups and our profession. I'm fortunate to have gotten to know each and every person in the group and I look forward to what's in store for each of us!"

Also related to community, as one Scholar discussed, having the Scholars at different professional stages was beneficial and fueled learning from one another, "that sense of community has been very crucial to my growth, and especially because we have such a good mix of folks within the cohort in their counselor ed [faculty] positions, people who were starting their doc programs, who are also doing full-time… there was a really good mix and that was really special."

In connecting with each other, while the Scholars appreciated the formal meetings organized by the facilitators, they also found the less structured supports to be meaningful, such as creating a group chat and spending time together socially at conference meals. Thus, as another Scholar expressed, "I really enjoyed this cohort overall. It was helpful in many ways. I enjoyed the informal discussions and support as much as the formal ones." Another shared that the sense of community helped them feel safe to take risks and self-disclose within their group, "I've felt very supported, and I think when you feel supported, you feel like you can take risks. And that's what I've been able to gain from [the PSC Scholars]."

On a similar note, the Scholars highlighted the benefits of this sense of community explicitly centering research. For instance,

> The PSC Scholars Program has actively kept me focused on the need for research in my field. It has provided a safe and encouraging space to grow in my research interests and ideas. By reviewing articles, I feel more confident in my professional abilities to write and publish. In addition, the PSC Scholars Program has created a network of friends and colleagues that support one another on our career accomplishments.

Further, at times, the Scholars would describe challenges with their scholarship, such as feeling behind on their dissertation. However, they also noted that talking to fellow Scholars alleviated the pressure and stress. Especially because these other scholars largely understood the unique experience in being a practicing school counselor while also being doctoral students, "my dissertation, I felt like I was so behind on. But then, being with a group of people that can just normalize that's not so and gives more reality and support to what's happening in my world, and I'm not alone. I think that's been big.

"The sense of community has been really nice, as well." They discussed entering the PSC Scholars cohort without knowing others, but then building community over time, "being able to be in this place with so many other people that are going through the same things that I'm going through… it created a good community because we all could relate to one another… I love having that sense of community. I don't get that from anywhere else. This whole PSC Scholars was huge for me, making me feel validated and that I am going to be fine in this career, and I will be able to move on, and I will be able to publish, and I will be able to research, and it gives me that sense of support going forward. This is an amazingly meaningful program that, that I'm just happy to be a part of."

Another Scholar relayed a similar sentiment,

> We don't get a lot of opportunities [to be with others with a similar professional background] in higher ed, and that's something that I'm really grateful for: community. I think another piece of what was helpful… being vulnerable and asking the scary questions that sometimes you can't ask in class or you don't know how to ask in a classroom setting. [But with the PSC Scholars program], let's be real. Let's talk about some of the scary things in higher ed, in research, and how do we go through that, and I'm really appreciative of that risk taking, to be in that vulnerable space."

Finally, a Scholar expressed how this cohort nourished them with not only information, knowledge, and strategies, but also relationships, "there are things that I didn't know that I needed until I got in this space. The community piece I really enjoy… It's easy to feel lost in all the hustle and bustle. But I don't feel that in this space."

Subtheme: 2B: Affirming and Normalizing Professional Transitions. This Emerging Scholars program lasted three years; in this time, many Scholars transitioned through different professional roles, including practicing school counselor, doctoral student, engaging in the academic job search, and holding faculty positions (i.e., "my role has shifted this year from student to professor"). Some went into academia, while others considered avenues such as adjunct teaching, educational consulting and training, as well as owning a small business. As such, over this three-year process, the Scholars found the cohort to be a helpful place, as they grappled with and weighed professional decisions, roles, and options. As one Scholar declared, "there are so many different paths and 'answers' and that [cohort environment] is very refreshing." Another echoed the presence of, "various experiences and paths [with a school counselor education doctorate]… It was reassuring [to discuss the paths with the cohort]." Thus, this cohort was seen as a place to explore professional options, amidst uncertainties, "I am not sure I have a solid idea of how to use what I have learned moving forward, but I know it will benefit me in some way in the future."

As such, a true benefit to the PSC Scholars Program is that the cohort offered an opportunity to gather emerging school counselor education scholars, who were at slightly different phases of their professional journey. Some starting doctoral programs and others starting faculty positions. As such, the program aided in,

> Normalizing… It was really helpful to have a group of people that I could see, [who] had already reached the end: the light at the end of the tunnel, and were a little bit ahead of me. And then people that were a little bit behind me, and people that were in my same stage. It was helpful to have all of those different voices and perspectives and encouragement [saying]: 'You can do this. You're capable of doing this.'

As a result, the group helped the Scholars envision possibilities for their own future, demystifying processes, such as the job search, "this group has allowed us to learn more about what it looks like moving forward [in a faculty position] because it's one thing to get the Ph.D. It's another thing to get the job." Relatedly, another Scholar noted their need for support, as they transitioned professional roles, "I need guidance on how to transition from a practitioner in the schools to a counselor educator. I need help with the research aspect of things."

In addition to navigating professional roles, the Emerging Scholars program provided an avenue to process the transitions in personal roles, outside of work. Several scholars became new parents, had changing partner roles, or moved. One Scholar discussed the intersection of their mother and academic identities, and how the program assisted them in reaching their scholarship goals,

> While working on my doctorate, I was a single mom and a full-time professional school counselor. As I balanced those areas of my life, I was unable to devote the time needed to develop and grow scholarship in the way I would have liked. I believed once I

> graduated, I would be able to focus on writing and would be able to submit publications. For example, I have been trying to submit my dissertation for publication. I began condensing it and trying to format and organize it. However, I am unsure if I am doing it correctly. The reality is that I need help from someone who is willing to invest in me to meet this goal. I would like to learn what it takes to write a great manuscript, as well as the steps to publication. While building a trusting relationship with my mentors, I would like feedback, encouragement, and support of my professional growth.

Relatedly, several scholars were full-time school counselors and part-time doctoral students. As a result, they often felt fragmented, left behind, and isolated in their doctoral programs, compared to others who were full-time doctoral students and fully immersed in their studies. As a result, this program was a space to be with others who were having a similar doctoral experience. Thus, this program offered a mechanism to normalize the Scholars unique trajectory through the doctoral programs. Mainly,

> I was really thankful that I was accepted into this program because I didn't have that time to write and publish [in my doctoral program], because I wasn't a full-time student. You don't get asked to be on certain things [projects]… I was really thankful for this [PSC Scholars] ‘cause I feel like now I'm back to that belief that like, yeah, it'll [my scholarship] happen. I finished [my PhD]. And it all works out the way that I needed it to.

Subtheme 2C: Community Providing Social Capital. Most Scholars held identities that are historically minoritized in academia such as: first in family to attend higher education (i.e., First Gen); working people; immigrants/people who immigrated; racial/ethnic global majority (i.e., BIPOC: Black Indigenous, and People of Color); mothers; women; and others. The Scholars described the added barriers they encountered, due to navigating a system that wasn’t built for them or their intersectional identities. As a result, many Scholars sought the PSC Emerging Scholars program in hopes of developing a community of support, including mentorship and peer community. They also sought to better understand the unspoken rules and culture of academia, or social capital. As such, community seemed to act as a buffer to marginalization, as well as an aspect of community cultural wealth.

One Scholar appreciated learning the culture of academia, particularly for those who haven’t had access to these networks and supports, they said, “mentorship, a critical piece of professional identity development, is often an informal process granted to professionals of privileged identities with particular networks and connections. I believe engaging in a formal mentorship process, in either group or individual format, will support me in the socialization process of academia and the profession at large.” They continued, describing that the PSC Scholars program was one strategy to access a community of mentorship and enhanced access to those informal academic networks, “this is my way of formally creating a professional

mentorship relationship specific to research and scholarship, one of my most significant areas for growth as a budding school counselor educator."

Another Scholar noted similar sentiments, communicating feelings of isolation and uncertainty, and desiring to build their social networks within academia,

> Navigating higher education as a first-generation graduate has been, at times, a lonely journey. Access to information on how to advance my career was not something that my family knew how to do. My parents always encouraged me to go to college because they knew being educated meant getting away from the blue-collar jobs they have had, but were not able to provide guidance for how to obtain a college degree.

Throughout their career, this PSC Scholar "sought out any opportunities that might help me understand how to access and navigate higher education… I knew that I had to work hard to find the information. Likewise, the PSC Emerging Scholars program would provide me with access to forge ahead in my career as a counselor educator, specifically with school counselors."

Relatedly, a Scholar also conveyed, "although I have gotten myself into a PhD program, the world of academia is still very elusive. I have worked hard to get through the coursework to get to this point in my education, but next comes navigating the ivory tower, and doing so as a woman of color."

A different Scholar reported being propelled by their commitment to social justice and increased representation in academia, and desiring a community of enhanced mentorship to support their aims,

> Navigating academic spaces as a woman, and a woman of color, is also something that I am very curious to learn more about. Higher education is still very much dominated by white men. As someone who considers herself a social justice warrior, I believe in increasing the number of women and people of color into academic spaces. Not only would I love to have a mentor who has laid the foundation for this endeavor, but I would like to learn from them how to continue this critical work.

In tandem, as a Scholar desired resources to help them navigate academia, they emphasized the importance of connecting with others, such as mentors, who shared their personal identities,

> As a First Gen student, growing up in a low socioeconomically disadvantaged status home, I feel particularly lost when it comes to navigating the world of publishing and writing proposals for academic research-centered conferences like AERA. I am also an introvert by nature, so I would like guidance on how to network and maintain relationships with other academics. I would appreciate having a mentor who has been a school counselor and is currently in academia. I would love it if that mentor were a BIPOC female, as a role model.

Subtheme 2D: Solidarity for School Counselor Educator Identity. Scholars have depicted the culture of counselor education as largely dominated by the clinical mental health specialty compared to school counseling; we see this in not only the number of faculty and doctoral students, but also in how counselor education content is focused in graduate programs, particularly in programs with multiple specialty areas (Betters-Bubon et al., 2021). As such, the PSC Scholars appreciated "the school counselor piece has been a really sacred and great space because [otherwise] we are around so many other disciplines, especially clinical [counseling]. So, it's nice to have a specific space for those with school counseling backgrounds and identities."

These sentiments related to professional identity were echoed by a range of Scholars, speaking to their motivation for joining the cohort, and what they appreciated, being in a program of only the school counseling specialty. As one explained,

> I am interested in this program because I am passionate about strengthening the school counselor to counselor educator and supervisor pipeline. In many counseling graduate programs, the majority of instructors come from clinical mental health counseling backgrounds. School counseling is often underrepresented, resulting in programs lacking a strong comprehensive school counseling education. In my state, very few graduate programs are educating their students on how to implement a comprehensive school counseling program once they are in the field. This is troublesome because we have new professionals in the field ill-equipped to create a school counseling program that will have positive outcomes for students. By strengthening the school counselor to counselor educator and supervisor pipeline, we will have more instructors in graduate programs who are effectively teaching and preparing future school counselors.

In a similar vein, a different Scholar reflected on the importance of a school counselor-specific space,

> As a first-year assistant professor, I am working to intentionally build my professional identity development as a school counselor educator. School Counselor educators are a minority within counselor education, and few professionals understand the nuance of school counseling practice embedded within the larger systems. I am currently the only professor specializing in school counseling at my institution. My position and role are critical to the students I mentor and teach. The sensed isolation of being the only school counselor educator has significant impacts on my students, the development of my professional identity, research, and the school counseling profession as a whole. I believe engaging in the PSC Emerging Scholars' Program will connect me with external scholarly relationships that will bolster my identity development and provide a community with others in similar spaces in their careers.

Further, one scholar applied for the PSC Emerging Scholars program, due to their professional identity and commitment to school counseling, after seeing the ill effects of *not* having a school counseling focus in their own preparation, "my passion behind having more school counselors in counselor education programs. I went through a CACREP program that had zero school counselor educators. I was not trained on comprehensive school counseling, even though I received a graduate degree that said school counseling. And so that was a big part of why I pursued my Ph.D., and got involved in this group."

Next, while some Scholars were involved in other mentoring and support groups for emerging scholars/professionals, they emphasized that the PSC Scholars program was especially impactful due to its unique focus on the school counseling specialty– which they found lacking in other mentorship/fellowship opportunities,

> I have previously engaged in other [counseling] emerging leaders' programs and fellowships; however, the uniqueness of this program is found within its emphasis on emerging scholars. I feel strong in my identity as an educator, supervisor, and leader within counselor education. However, I hope that I can focus on strengthening this piece of my professional identity [scholarship] through [this] emerging scholars' program… I am one of only two school counselors in my doctoral program… No one in my committee or cohort, except for the one other counselor, shares the same passion and topic interest I have for school counseling."

Finally, while the Scholars shared their commitment to the field, which was rooted in their robust identity as a school counselor, they also communicated their desire to expand that identity to also encapsulate school counselor scholarship, advocacy, and systemic change, "but, how do we continue to advocate for school counseling? How do we become researchers and writers and true contributors to academia? I appreciate this group, and it's been inspiring and hopeful to see that there are so many great people entering the profession. And I hope that we can continue to move the needle forward. Because unfortunately, there's still so much work to be done when it comes to higher ed and the preparation of school counselors." They continued, "This group has given me a lot of hope for, for us continuing to, to advance the [school counseling] profession."

Theme 3: Dismantling While Reimagining

As the PSC Scholars applied to the cohort and throughout the duration of the program, they largely expressed their commitment to antiracism and worked toward more equitable and socially just systems, including academia. During the program, they also discussed the complexities in dismantling oppressive systems, while also dreaming, imagining, and working toward a more equitable and just academia and school counseling profession. As such, the Scholars discussed the delicate push and pull of both dismantling while reimagining, as noted in Theme 3, which is broken down into four subthemes: (a) authentically acknowledging the

realities of academia; (b) the intentionality of the program structure; (c) demystifying academia; and (d) changing the status quo.

Subtheme 3A: Authentically Acknowledging the Realities of Academia. According to the participants, the PSC Emerging Scholars program provided an authenticity that was refreshing and helpful. Rather than sugar coating academia, the culture, climate, and discussions acknowledged the realities: the challenges, in addition to the strengths. As the Scholars expressed, "I enjoyed hearing about the need to join or create a research team, as well as possible failures. [We heard about] failed research relationships and that is what I think about a lot in academia. I feel a need to be on guard from unauthentic relationships in academia. I think it is different coming from a K-12 setting where there is not a competitive undertone." Also appreciating the authenticity of the cohort, one scholar shared being involved in a number of other professional *emerging scholars/leaders* groups, and that the PSC Scholars program was different. Mainly,

> This is my third or fourth *Emerging Leaders* group. And this is the one I've gotten the most out of. We all were super committed to this [program] and to each other, and nobody had the social capital of being socialized in academia. There was like this baseline understanding of: there's no dumb questions here. And we were all collectively committed to each other. And that created this space for us to ask questions, and even demand things… We're not gonna be a part of this program just for the sake of it… let's actually move the needle forward and not just talk about it. And that felt really radical to be in a space where everybody was like, 'Let's not talk. Let's move.' And that's been really supportive in my development. That has fueled me.

Subtheme 3B: The Intentionality of the Program Structure. In addition to emphasizing the authenticity and realness of the program, the Scholars perceived the PSC Scholars as highly intentional. For instance, the leaders have been "[prioritizing] safety and inclusion: that has been really great" and "being really intentional about trying to make it work for as many of us as it is possible. Which, I know it's hard with different time zones and responsibilities." While appreciating the authenticity, the Scholars observed the benefits of using data within the intentional program. Mainly, "the leaders intentionality in using data to drive the program has me in a very optimistic space" and "I appreciate the intentionality that you all have had. You have thrown out all kinds of like needs assessments."

Subtheme 3C:Demystifying Academia. Building upon the intentionality of the program design, the Scholars noticed and welcomed the focus on demystifying academia, naming the challenges and oppression, while advocating for ways to dismantle and navigate. One Scholar communicated that the program was "showing us that there are other people that believe we can decolonize academia. Sometimes doing [this work as an academic] can feel really isolating.

It feels like this big monstrous thing that we don't actually know how to do. We just know that we're trying to do *the thing*. So, creating a space to brainstorm what this could look like.

Due to the PSC Scholars program demystifying scholarship, Scholars felt more knowledgeable and having greater confidence in this area, which was conveyed by two individuals (below),

> Something that is wrapped in layers of nuance is publication in professional peer-reviewed journals; it is one of the most intimidating aspects of becoming a tenured-track educator. The PSC Emerging Scholars program would help in demystifying the process of publication, and I would be doing so with a cohort of peers all going through the same thing. Higher education has been a lonely journey. Yes, I have been adamant in my search of opportunity and relentless in my questioning to understand higher education, but I have done all these things on my own. Having a group of peers that are all in the same or similar stage in their educational pursuits and professional journeys could provide a space of camaraderie and support that I've never experienced.

> The beginning years of scholarship are often described as bumpy, challenging, and isolating. Collaboration and mentorship are critical to developing and sustaining meaningful research and scholarship. However, breaking into established writing communities feels near impossible without formal mentorship relationships. I am on a regular cycle of competence, imposter syndrome, feeling isolated with terse moments of production and meaningful work. Although I do have some community in counselor education, they are primarily with individuals who specialize in clinical mental health and have very little understanding of the state of school counseling. I have a deep desire to write with other scholars passionate about similar research. However, I am unsure how to start or even engage those communities. I experience extreme isolation in my writing process right now, which is counterintuitive to my collective identity

Subtheme 3D: Changing the Status Quo. The reflections on demystifying academia were closely intertwined with discussing the need to challenge the status quo and disrupt the traditional practices and systems in academia. Several Scholars shared that through the PSC Scholars program, they perceived a decolonizing of academia: changing systems of oppression and expanding access for those with identities who have been traditionally and presently marginalized within these systems. Yet at the same time, also navigating the systems. Overall, acknowledging this delicate tension: balancing the dismantling of systems of oppression while also navigating these systems to gain greater power, which aids in furthering the dismantling. These sentiments were shared in the following quotes.

As a Scholar conveyed,

> What does decolonizing academia look like in this space? Would it be introducing a special issue? Will it be leveraging the work that grad students are doing in this cohort?

> But how do they [graduate students] benefit from it? I think so often we do the things, and we go along with the system even when we know the system's not fair to everybody, just because: it is what it is. So, I think creating spaces where we're not just talking about the things that are wrong, but also figuring out, 'Okay, what can we do practically to try to get in spaces where we can make changes?'

Hence, they reflected on the power of their Scholars' collective voices: that their feedback and advocacy drove the direction of the Emerging Scholars program. Specifically, while the program started out as a two-year cohort, the Scholars relayed the importance of gaining practical experience and the importance of publication experience. Thus, in addition to mentorship, support, and increased understanding/exposure to research, they also desired access beyond this. They wanted to actually write and publish, as publications are a highly prioritized aspect of social capital that holds weight in academic systems.

This participant continued their reflection on how to decolonize academia, "I'm still not sure where this space lives. Like, who is in charge of the APA Manual [for publishing]? There are these powers that govern a lot of the things that we do, and it's just like, Okay, I don't like that they doing this, but how do I get at the table with the people that are in charge of these things? I really want to know how I get in these spaces where we truly disrupt systems. And I feel like this [PSC Scholars] is a really good space to do it. The people in this space have verbalized that in their willingness to do it, which is a brave thing to do, and it's a hard thing to do, especially when you're still trying to just show up and live every day." As such, this particular scholar acknowledged that advocacy, courage, and work are required when disrupting oppressive systems in academia, and that this PSC Emerging Scholars cohort was a space where this happened.

A different Scholar discussed the process of challenging the status quo within academia and to expect pushback; that the PSC Scholars program helped them normalize pushback as part of systemic change. Such as, "I'm so glad that [we discussed] , when interrogating [systems], you're gonna get pushback. In my faculty position, I can ask a simple question: 'Help me understand this whole process. Why can't we change admissions?' And as a school counselor I'm very used to hearing 'no,' and then figuring out another creative way to get the same outcome. That's what we do as school counselors. That kind of creativity challenges the status quo." In addition to navigating oppressive systems, this Scholar also appreciated the sharing of power across the cohort, which they described as a strategy toward decolonizing academia. "I feel like in this space [the cohort], there has been so much power-sharing in the sense of sharing knowledge of processes, which I don't experience in my faculty position... sharing the knowledge [with us] is power-sharing. And not withholding the knowledge. And that piece of: How do we actually decolonize it [academia]? It's by sharing the knowledge and not making it a secret. And I feel like that's what has been done in this [PSC Scholars] space."

A different Scholar reflected on the discussions during cohort meetings, noting the conversations on, “really good examples on how to disrupt bureaucracy. I wanna acknowledge and make sure that's on the record, that you all spend way more time than like the two-hour meetings that we have. I know I personally have emailed you all, like a lot. And you were all very friendly and were like, ‘How can we help? How can we support you?’ Demystifying [for us] as [we were] trying to see if we can get a faculty position. There was peer mentoring that happened along with building community. But I've been in other *Emerging* programs where they didn't really do that [demystifying and disrupting], so, I know that was extra [to include this in the PSC Emerging Scholars program]. And beyond that, you all took your time from your families to really make sure and took care of us.”

On a related note, a Scholar appreciated that the PSC Scholars program pushed back against the historically individualistic nature of academia, to instead highlight relationship and community as a means to address scholarship. Specifically,, “I genuinely believe in community and having a village to support you…. [but this program] almost seems anti-academia. So I am very excited to be part of a program that centers on connectivity and fellowship.”

As a final example of chipping away at the status quo, we will describe the emphasis of centering the Scholars’ voices throughout this cohort, including the program structure. As described in the Context, we started the program with pre-set goals and content for meetings. However, we also valued fluidity to center the Scholars' needs and suggestions. We found that this structure resulted in (a) a sense of community and trust, where the Scholars expressed feeling valued as co-collaborators in the program; (b) constantly evolving dialogue and content based on the Scholars’ needs; (c) adding a third year to the program structure and developing a PSC special issue focused on the Scholars’ scholarship. As such, we believe that extending the cohort one additional year and the Scholars publishing unique and innovative scholarship in their PSC Special Issue, is another way to push back upon an existing system, by decreasing barriers and increasing access to scholarly peer-review publication and researcher voice. This process was conveyed by Scholars such as, “I am glad we are getting to write for a special issue and I wish it could have been part of the entire two-year program. I know this idea emerged from the group and I am grateful that we will still have an opportunity to engage in the writing process and that it will be integrated into future cohorts.”

Action Research Phase 4: Reflection

Lastly, in the final step of action research *Reflecting,* scholars make meaning of this iteration of the action research cycle (Creswell, 2019). Hence, in this fourth step not only do scholars deepen their understanding of the situation or circumstance under investigation, they are also preparing to identify gaps or needs still present, and then to begin the action research cycle again, planning for another cycle.

Overall, early career school counselor educators, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds and those coming directly from the school counseling role, can face a host of unique and intersectional challenges: inequitable systems, isolation, and feeling ill-equipped in the development of their professional networks and research skills (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Lamar & Helm, 2017; Lopez-Perry et al, 2021; Limberg et al., 2020; Milson & Moran, 2015; Ngadjui et al., 2025). As a result, this population requires a purposeful and nuanced approach to mentorship.

Reflections: Research

When using an action research lens to examine Cohort 1 of the PSC Emerging Scholars program, a particularly robust theme related to the process and outcomes of prioritizing research. The Milsom and Moran (2015) study was a seminal driver in the development of the PSC Scholars program. In particular, we focused on their discussion regarding (a) the importance of school counselor educators having prior experience as practicing school counselors, and (b) that research skills were the area of the greatest challenge, in transitioning from practitioner to academic.

As a result, for the present PSC program, we required that all Scholars had been practicing school counselors, and we created program content that was heavily based on expanding Scholars' research experience and exposure. Similarly, according to the results of our action research project, the Scholars verbosely described their initial apprehension and lack of skills pertinent to research. Yet, not only did these narratives shift throughout the cohort process to become more positive and confident, but by the end of the program, the Scholars requested extending the program a year to gain additional scholarly experiences, including successfully publishing a scholarly article in the *PSC* journal special issue.

Finally, as the program progressed, it also appeared that the Scholars' research identity became more cohesive with other aspects of their intersectional identities. For instance, earlier in the program, the Scholars expressed wanting to engage in research; their commitment to social justice and advocacy work; as well as discussing the life experiences, based on their intersectional identities. Later in the program they voiced the integration of these constructs: using research to propel their social justice and advocacy work, and to bring their own personhood and worldview into the research process as well, which is evidenced in several of the articles in this special issue, such as the autoethnographies..

Reflections: Community

In addition to the focus on research, the PSC Scholars program was heavily centered in community, similar to Yosso's (2005) strength-based CCW concept of social capital (i.e., supportive communities and relationships). Mainly, similar to the study by Betters-Bubon and colleagues (2021), due to the unique professional identity of *school* counselors, especially in a

field which reportedly can be overshadowed and minoritized by the *clinical mental health* counseling specialty, the PSC Scholars program filled a need. We developed a program and a *professional home* for the school counselor educator specialty area, to normalize and validate unique professional concerns and transitions.

Concomitantly, the Emerging Scholars program addressed the gaps stated in the scholarship pertaining to loneliness and the desire for connection with others who share both professional and cultural identities, particularly for those in global majority communities. For instance, scholars have noted that isolation that can occur when transitioning from school counseling practitioner (i.e., which often includes a robust school and district community), to the role of faculty, in which one's schedule and relationships have less built-in structure and takes intentionality to cultivate (Milsom & Moran, 2015). In light of these challenges, the PSC Scholars program engaged in strategies to enhance community, mirroring recommendations by Lopez-Perry et al., (2021), particularly within the *school* counseling specialty and for BIPOC school counselor doctoral students and faculty. Such as, counter-storytelling, which "provides voice and space to [school counseling] BIPOC students and faculty to share their stories and experiences of marginalization" (p. 7) as well as *aspirational capital,* an aspect of CCW in which school counselor education doctoral students discuss aspirations for their life, both personally and professionally.

Reflections: Dismantling While Reimagining

In developing the PSC Emerging Scholars program, we prioritized centering the Scholars voices, which drove content and structure, such as the third qualitative theme: dismantling while reimagining. For instance, Scholars appreciated that the program was built around "power-sharing," flattening the hierarchy between facilitators and them. As a result of this approach, the Scholars guided content and discussions during monthly meetings as well as changes in program structure. For instance, while our initial content revolved around conceptualizations of *navigational capital* (i.e., navigating systems lacking in BIPOC representation), as the cohort progressed, the PSC Scholars program evolved to provide a greater emphasis on *resistance capital* (i.e., pushing back on inequitable systems) (Yosso, 2005). We attribute this change largely to the scholars, as their feedback helped expand the scope of the program from *navigating* to *reimagining* academia, as detailed in the third theme.

In a similar vein, due to the Scholars' partnership in the program or "power-sharing," their requests led to the addition of extending the program for a third year and adding the PSC Special Issue, where they each crafted and completed a scholarly, peer-reviewed article. Overall, these results echo the literature, such as Lopez-Perry and colleagues' (2021) recommendations for engaging in recruitment and retention grounded in Critical Race Theory, as well as Yosso's (2005) CCW model (i.e., "power-sharing;" *resistance capital*; as well as examining and pushing back on systems of oppression). The final theme was full of similar examples, not only how the

PSC program aided Scholars in demystifying the realities of academia as well as strategies for navigating a system steeped in historic inequities, and then the resolve to resist and chip away at these inequities, toward reimagining something better.

Next Steps

As we are reflecting on the process of PSC Emerging Scholars Cohort 1, through the action research process, we are also preparing for Cohort 2 and the next iteration of this four-step process. First, we anticipate maintaining the key elements of the Emerging Scholars program (i.e., recruitment, selection, meeting content, program structure, and evaluation) that led to an enhanced research experiences and exposure, community, and also navigating and reimagining academia. In addition, based on our results we are proposing the following changes:

- **Program Duration and PSC Special Issue:** The program will permanently shift the program from a two-year to a three-year cohort, with the inclusion of the *PSC* special issue.
- **Expanding Resources and Reading:** based on Cohort 1, reading and other resources will be added for Cohort 1, such as (a) seminal scholarship that guided program development (i.e., Betters-Bubon et al; 2022; Lopez-Perry et al., 2021; Milsom & Moran, 2015); (b) reinforcing a cultural strength-based approach, intersectional identities, and a critical lens to interrogating and changing inequitable systems, such as the CCW (Yosso, 2005); (c) a critical theories, including an antiracist approach to school counseling research (i.e., Washington et al., 2023); and finally (d) Cohort 1's special issue
- **PSC Peer-Reviewer:** While the cohort engaged in the peer-reviewing of PSC manuscripts together, due to time constraints, they did not engage in independent peer view. As a result, we will revamp the timing and structure independent PSC peer-review.
- **Extending Data Collection:** The "end of program" data collection occurred at the conclusion of year two, when Cohort 1 was initially scheduled to end. After adding a third year to the program, for Cohort 2, all final data collection will be scheduled for the end of the third year, after the completion of the special issue, to garner Scholars' results in totality.
- **Additional Leadership:** Toward program sustainability, there will be the addition of a third Associate Editor added, to co-facilitate the program.
- **Cross-Cohort Community and Continued Involvement:** As Cohort 1 concludes, they will be given the option to maintain involvement in the program (i.e., advisory council, mentors to Cohort 2, and PSC reviewers). Thus, Cohort 1 can maintain community as desired, and this builds a bridge between Cohort 1 and 2.

Conclusion

We engaged in an action research study to capture strengths and areas to improve the Emerging Scholars program; our general aim was to help the scholars be more comfortable with research and benefit from being in community with a group of budding and seasoned scholars. However,

a significant byproduct of these efforts was voiced loud and clear from the scholars themselves, moving beyond simply "navigating" academia but "dismantling" and "reimagining" academia. This work collectively fostered something beyond a mentoring program but offered a critical community that this cohort can use to buffer the present challenges and those that lie ahead. And while there are undoubtedly still difficulties, within these relationships the scholars experienced support and also have found meaning and enjoyment in the process, and are looking forward with promise. Illustrated in part by the following quote,

> *"This group has given me a lot of hope for us continuing to advance the [school counseling] profession."*

While this study was robust, there is an expectation for on-going cycles of improvement within action research. For instance, the researchers collected both quantitative and qualitative data, however, over the course of the publication process presenting both data sets was unwieldy at times. Therefore, we chose to center the participants' voices to increase impact, and recognize that modifications to the research design will be warranted in the future (e.g., more precise choices of the instruments based on the current iteration).

Nonetheless, as this article construction is coming to a close and the inaugural PSC Emerging Scholars are wrapping up their articles for the Special Issue, we are planning for the next PSC Emerging Scholars cohort soon. In sum, the current study, the body of articles in the Special Issue and anecdotal feedback from this entire process continues to evolve and the context in which the next cohort unfolds will inevitably be different. In this case and in the future, we hope that the voices of the Scholars presented within this study will continue to challenge us all to recognize that representation matters and there are opportunities to support the development of future school counselor educators across all spectrums of personal and professional identities.

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