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The Virtual Counseling Transition and its Influence on School Counselor Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual counseling during the Covid-19 pandemic, the factors influencing their sense of confidence, and successes and challenges associated with the transition to virtual counseling. Study participants characterized the transition to virtual counseling as challenging and reported the process decreased their self-efficacy. Participants identified four salient categories of challenges associated with the transition to virtual counseling, including difficulty maintaining accountability and contact with students, decreased work/life balance, diminished sense of connection with students, and lack of preparation to conduct virtual school counseling. Successes resulting from the transition to virtual counseling, included enhanced technology skills and utilization of technology to expand virtual services to students and families.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic impacted all sectors of society: family, industry, health, and education. In response, the world is learning to live with new and enduring strains of the COVID-19 virus.. Federal and state governments issued a number of mandates: stay at home (Kassinger, 2021), indoor versus outdoor regulations (Marchiori, 2020), masking (Chan, 2020; Kai et al., 2020), and quarantine regulations (Memon et al., 2021; Parmet & Sinha, 2020). All of these mandates have had a direct impact on every element of society, especially school-aged children.

Recent educational research has focused on the COVID-19 impact on students' educational loss (Black et al., 2020; Praghopapati, 2020) and emotional well-being (Buckner et

al., 2021; Cao et al, 2020; Elmer et al., 2020) as well as the impact on teachers (Barton, 2020;

Kaden, 2020). The recent statement by U.S. Surgeon General Murthy highlighted the negative

impact some pandemic policies have had on the mental health of children (Powell, 2022);

consequently, school counselors are going to become more integral in supporting children in

school. Published reports from the Centers for Disease Control suggest that students who

participated in virtual instructional delivery during COVID-19 may be at higher risk for negative

emotional and physical health outcomes and may need additional support to overcome pandemic

experiences (Vernlenden, et al., 2021). However, very little research exists on the Covid-19

impact on school counselors.

The purpose of this research is to study the influence of COVID-19 on P-12 school

counselors. Specifically, the focus of the qualitative study is to study the influence on school

counselor self-efficacy. The pandemic has impacted all other sectors of schooling and with the

new focus on increased mental health issues, school counselors' beliefs in their abilities during

this time will be integral to successful school transitions for children and parents. The study aims

to answer the following research questions:

1. How do school counselors describe their transition to virtual counseling?

2. How did the transition to virtual counseling influence school counselors' confidence
   levels?

3. How do school counselors describe the successes and challenges associated with their
   transition to virtual counseling?

Literature Review

The rate of mental health issues among school-aged youth is increasing at an alarming

rate (Lambie et al., 2019) especially with the impact of COVID-19 (Ahmed & Firdous, 2020;

Pincus, et al.,2020). In fact, school closures withdrew a layer of mental health support during a time of social isolation and loneliness due to stay-at-home and quarantine orders (Thakur, 2020; Viner et al., 2022). As a result, school-aged children today face more mental health challenges than ever before (Benton et al., 2022). Not only have children suffered a learning loss, but they have suffered a counseling loss as well.

Now that schools are reopening, school personnel are faced with dealing with the increased manifestations of those mental health issues: anxiety, depression, aggression, irritability, substance abuse, and suicidal ideations (Bera, et al., 2022; Shirotsuki et al., 2022). School administrators, teachers, and school counselors are now left with managing the increase in negative behaviors as well as the self-destructive internalized behaviors of students.

School counselors have historically experienced difficulty in fulfilling their roles in the actual counseling realm due to increased non-counseling duties ascribed to them that reduce the time spent with students and increased caseloads (Blake, 2020). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2023), school counselors should help all students do the following:

- Apply academic strategies for success

- Manage emotions

- Develop and apply interpersonal skills

- Plan for post-secondary pathways (ASCA, 2023, p. 1)

However, many counselors find they are assigned non-counseling duties that are traditionally considered administrative tasks such as scheduling, test coordination, or bus supervision duties (Fye, et al., 2020a; Kim & Lambie, 2018).

Due to these factors, school counselors are already at risk of burnout, prior to the pandemic setting (Fye et al., 2020b; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mullen et al., 2021). Sandhu and Singh (2021) state, "Counselors work in emotionally charged interpersonal settings which make them susceptible to stress that can ultimately lead to burnout" (p. 258). The authors continue to underscore the augmented risk of burnout in the face of the pandemic.

School counselors feel most effective and less stressed when their job expectations are aligned to the ASCA National Model (2012) guidelines (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Mullen et al., 2021). However, during the pandemic, ASCA guidelines were not followed because counselors had limited access to students. Counselors are needed front and center to address the mental health and social emotional support of students in schools (Cook et al., 2019), but the pandemic moved the front line for many. In fact, many counselors initially felt less effective when they were needed the most (Strear et al., 2021).

Self-Efficacy

The link between counseling behaviors and effectiveness may be found in the concept of counselor self-efficacy. Lee and Bobko (1994) studied Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy and stated,

> Those who have a strong sense of self-efficacy in a particular situation will devote their attention and effort to the demands of the situation, and when faced with obstacles and difficult situations, these individuals will try harder and persist longer (p. 364).

In essence, self-efficacy is a social cognitive theory (SCT) that states the degree to which an individual believes in his/her abilities will dictate his/her effectiveness accordingly (Bandura, 1997). Three major assumptions exist with this SCT:

1. People can learn through observing others, even if initial prior experience is lacking.

2. Reinforcement is the key to learning, both externally and internally. The mental preparedness to learn is achieved through intrinsic motivation.

3. Self-regulation is necessary for change to occur and be sustained; changed behaviors do not necessarily result from new learning. (Bandura, 1991)

In the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which constitutes new territory for many, these three assumptions must be examined. First, many schools across the world altered the modality of instruction and the time in school due to the pandemic. "Close to 80% of the world's student population is affected by school closures in 138 countries" (Chang & Yano, 2020, p. 1). Consequently, traditional, face-to-face teaching and learning was shifted to some form of virtual learning (Black et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Stage et al., 2020), and this drastically impacted access to children. Because of the decisions made by state and federal officials, counselors were forced to adapt. Many have never had the opportunity to observe how to effectively provide counseling services in a virtual environment.

The second assumption addresses counselors' intrinsic motivation to learn. School counselors, under increasing pressure, have succeeded in serving schools in progressively needful environments with fewer resources (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Weiner & Holder, 2018). However, school counselors have been noted to have a higher level of dissatisfaction with their role ambiguity and increased burnout (Blake, 2020; Fye et al., 2020a). This increased frustration with a job description and expectations as well as burnout may have an impact on motivation (Holman et al., 2019).

The last assumption rests in that fact that counselors must self-regulate learning to impact self-efficacy and create any real change. Bandura (1991) states to self-regulate, one must monitor one's own behavior, make judgements about those behaviors in relation to personal norms and

environmental factors, and influence self-reaction. This self-regulation helps facilitate the pursuit

of personal goals (Inzlicht et al., 2021). The question remains if counselors have the supervisory

support to formulate those personal goals.

Vast research has been conducted on teacher self-efficacy, and the research shows that

teacher engagement and job satisfaction are positively related to self-efficacy (Kasalak &

Dagyar, 2020). However, a paucity of research has been conducted on school counselor self-

efficacy when considering the domains of the ASCA National Model (2012) that keep the

development of the whole student at the forefront to bridge counseling and education. Therefore,

it is important to investigate how the pandemic influenced counselor self-efficacy. counseling

program that meets the ASCA recommendations for a program achieves the following:

- Touches every student and is delivered systemically.

- Uses data to make programmatic decisions.

- Identifies measurable student competency deficiencies based on local data in

  the areas of academic, social/personal, and career domains.

- Includes comprehensive programming that works to close the achievement

  and opportunity gaps.

- Includes school counseling curriculum, individual counseling, responsive

  services, and system support that yields results in improved student

  achievement, attendance, and discipline. (ASCA, 2012, p. 1)

During the pandemic, counseling programs struggled to meet one much less all of these

recommendations. With the diminished student contact and learning losses suffered, academic

and opportunity gaps widened (Blasko et al., 2021; Kaffenberger, 2021; Werner & Woessmann,

2021). Virtual school student attendance remained an issue, either because of motivation,

internet connectivity (Rizvi & Nabi, 2021), or illness (Chernozhukov et al., 2021), and this made student contact even more difficult.

Growth Mindset

The transition to virtual counseling required an openness to new ways of operating. School counselors, to be successful, needed to navigate these challenges with a growth mindset (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). Dweck (2006) presents the concepts of two opposing ways of conceptualizing and navigating challenges: with a fixed mindset or a growth mindset.

In a fixed mindset, school counselors view their knowledge, skills, and abilities in a static way. Meaning, school counselors try to make the new challenge fit old modes of operation. Whereas, in a growth mindset, counselors view their knowledge, skills, and abilities as dynamic with conceivable improvement through new opportunities (Dweck, 2006; Patrick & Joshi, 2019). These prospects provide the chance for school counselors to learn new skills and adapt to the changing situation.

"*Growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others*."

–Dweck (2016), *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (p. 7.)

School counselors play a critical role in helping students navigate change (King-White, 2019; Lewis et al., 2020). The shift to virtual counseling prompted school counselors to reflect on how they would navigate new challenges. School counselors essentially had to ask themselves how to effectively support students virtually. Personal reflections on avoiding challenges to prevent potential failures or taking risks were prevalent. Did counselors view the new terrain as an opportunity to hone skills?

How school counselors view their own intelligence and abilities matters. School counselors' perceptions about their own abilities guide how they perceive and approach challenges as well as how they model a growth mindset to the students they aim to serve. In essence, growth spurs growth, and confidence bestows confidence. Students were also embarking on new terrain and needed more support than ever (Pincus et al., 2020; Talmus, 2019). Therefore, the growth mindset exhibited by the adults in the building could have a tremendous impact on student success as well (Larberg & Sherlin, 2021).

Methodology

Numerous research designs and assessment techniques have been utilized to investigate teacher self-efficacy in providing virtual instruction. However, few research studies have focused on school counselors' self-efficacy and experiences transitioning to virtual counseling. The complexity of the transition to virtual counseling, as well as the myriad of challenges associated with counseling in a virtual environment, necessitate a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy, 2017). For these reasons, this study employs a basic qualitative research design, including qualitative structured interviews to gain in-depth insight about school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual counseling.

A basic qualitative design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual counseling, how the transition influenced their confidence, and the successes and challenges they experienced. Levy (2017) asserts that utilizing a basic qualitative research strategy with structured interviews is particularly powerful in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions, which was integral to this study. This research strategy enabled individual school

counselors' rich personal reflections on their own experiences to be compared with other participants in the study (Creswell, 2018; Leavy, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 2015).

The interviews utilized five structured questions which aligned to one of the study's three overarching research questions and utilized an open-ended question structure to encourage research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions of the transition to virtual school counseling. The interview questions focused upon four important areas including, the transition to virtual school counseling, how the transition influenced their confidence level, successes and challenges they experienced, as well as advice they would give other school counselors. By purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, informed by research literature, and aligned with one of the study's overarching research questions, the researchers ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The research interviews were conducted utilizing video conferencing software spanning a two-week period.

Research Participants

School counselors in a southeastern state in the United States were invited to share their perspective in individual research interviews. Eleven school counselors agreed to participate in the study. Percy et al. (2015) asserted that even a research sample that is small may provide great insight and information on the research topic. The research participants shared one critical characteristic which met the inclusion criteria for the research study – employment as a school counselor who transitioned to virtual counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study were diverse in years of school counseling experience, school counseling grade level, gender, and race and ethnicity, increasing the likelihood of the

representativeness of the sample. Additionally, the interview participants geographically spanned

the state. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the article for the research participants.

Data Analysis

> Creswell (2018) states,

> The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It

> involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving

> deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making

> an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. (p. 183)

Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic,

constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the

researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure

saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and patterns

associated with school counselors' transition to virtual counseling (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participants (n=11)	School Counseling Experience	Gender	Race
1. Brenda	10 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
2. Amy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
3. Blake	15 Years, High School	Male	Caucasian
4. Emily	22 Years, High School	Female	African American
5. Hanna	17 Years, High School	Female	African American
6. Sabrina	28 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
7. Sofia	1 Year, High School	Female	African American
8. Sally	25 Years, Elementary School	Female	Caucasian
9. Sam	8 Years, Middle School	Male	Caucasian
10. Scott	2 Years, High School	Male	African American

11. Wendy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian

Table 1 illustrates the participant pseudonyms, years of school counseling experience, gender, and race

The researchers frequently revisited the participants' interview data utilizing a constant comparison analysis technique. This inductive analysis led to six themes emerging from the data that answered the study's overarching research questions and provided insight into school counselors' experiences. While thematic analysis was a critically important component, the analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. Previous research literature on school counseling and self-efficacy was instrumental in assessing the data collected in the individual interviews and evaluating the research findings. Research literature assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study's data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

Results

School counselors participating in this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the following three overarching research questions: 1) How do school counselors describe their transition to virtual counseling? 2) How did the transition to virtual counseling influence counselors' confidence levels? 3) How do school counselors describe the successes and challenges associated with their transition to virtual counseling? Research participant responses were strikingly similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race and ethnicity.

An analysis of the individual interview data highlights all the participants interviewed in this research study reported the transition to virtual counseling initially rattled their confidence level and effectiveness as a school counselor. In fact, all of the school counselors participating in this study viewed the transition to virtual counseling as more difficult than in traditional

environments, requiring different knowledge, skills, and abilities in several key areas. Most interview participants also characterized the transition to virtual counseling as "challenging," "very ineffective," "difficult," "terrible," and more "time-intensive" than counseling in traditional face-to-face educational environments. Most participants also shared that the experience of transitioning to virtual counseling felt isolating. For example, when asked about the transition to virtual counseling, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared,

> It was bumpy. When you are in a brick and mortar school, you are never alone. There's always a child in your office. There's always a colleague at your door. There's always interaction. And if you need something, you get on your feet and you walk and you get something or somebody. Or if there's an issue you need to address, you have all the resources you need right there in that building to take care of that at that moment.

All 11 participants in the study also shared that the challenges of transitioning to virtual school counseling decreased their own sense of confidence and self-efficacy. For example, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience stated her sense of self confidence,

> Went way down, because we felt like we weren't reaching the students we needed to reach. And we could not do what we had done in the past to get the results that we had in the past.

Similarly, Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor with over 28 years of experience shared,

> It made me feel less important at the time, because the teachers, they got the focus, which they should, the academic courses. And I would pop into their Zoom

classes and say hey to the kids before or at the end and reach out to them. But I

had never felt so irrelevant as I did during those Zoom times.

Several study participants also perceived the lack of preparation and professional development

for the shift to virtual counseling also exerted an influence on their sense of self-efficacy. For

example, Scott, a second-year high school counselor commented,

It was very challenging for me. Transition wise, I think that I did a fairly decent

job, but my confidence was not there at first. I'm going to be honest because there

was no training on how to make those transitions. I kind of had to do it on the fly.

Virtual School Counseling Challenges

Research participants passionately recounted numerous challenges they encountered in

the transition to virtual counseling. Interview participants identified four salient categories of

challenges that emerged from the transition to virtual counseling: 1) difficulty maintaining

accountability and contact with students 2) achieving an effective work and life balance due to

new work expectations and responsibilities; 3) diminished sense of connection with students; 4)

and lack of preparation to conduct school counseling virtually. The following sections present

the data gained relating to each of the aforementioned areas to provide insight on school

counselors' perceptions about challenges associated with transitioning to a virtual counseling

role.

Maintaining Accountability and Contact of Students

All the study's participants rated the difficulty in maintaining accountability and staying

in contact with students as one of the most significant challenges they experienced in the

transition to virtual counseling. Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience

shared she was "not able to contact students. And the ones that you couldn't contact were the ones you needed to contact." Similarly, Sofia, a first-year high school counselor commented,

> It's hard to reach students when they are virtual versus when they are at school
>
> and you can have that face to face interaction with them. When they went virtual,
>
> it was hard getting in touch with them. And now that some are back, the
>
> majority's back, it just seems like it has created a wedge in between the counselor-
>
> student relationship because they haven't had any structure, they haven't had
>
> guidance, and they're just lost.

This difficulty in contacting and maintaining accountability for students during the COVID-19 pandemic was a major source of stress for many virtual counselors. For example, Hanna, a high school counselor with 17 years of experience shared her main concern was,

> Losing a child and not being able to get in touch with students, which did happen.
>
> We put in a lot of systems into place where having a spreadsheet - if one teacher
>
> heard from one child, we indicated that on the spreadsheet. And so we knew
>
> somebody had some contact with the child. But in cases where there were kids
>
> where there was no one in contact, then we went to different levels of getting a
>
> social worker involved. But my main concern was losing a child.

Similarly, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience confided one of her greatest challenges was,

> How to keep in contact with students, how to stay connected and making sure that
>
> they felt like that we were still there for them, that they could not reach us. So as
>
> many channels as possible between that Google Classroom, between that Google
>
> voice, email, Google Meet, just wanted to make sure that they didn't lose sight of

the message "We are still here for you. We are still here to support you." I think

that was a major challenge. Because a lot of students and parents felt like they

were just on their own.

Fostering an Effective Work/Life Balance

Research participants also found the transition to virtual counseling resulted in expanded

job responsibilities and counseling expectations. The shift to virtual work blurred the time

boundaries of their usual workday, expanding work into the evenings and weekends. For

example, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience confided,

I think one of the main things that we did is we became available after hours,

which was very hard on us. And not all the time, but I felt like when we were out,

I was answering my emails sometimes eight, nine o'clock. Just trying to be

available because people's stress levels were so high and just trying to just meet

those needs.

These expanded hours and expectations for evening and weekend counseling services exerted a

toll on maintaining an effective work/life balance for many virtual counselors. This sentiment is

expressed by Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience who confided,

It impacted my stress, because we were working from home, so I was so glad

when we were finally able to come back in the building at one point, even though

students weren't here, we were able to come back in the building because then it

was hard to separate personal from professional. They were always lumped

together. And I felt like I was just always working.

Likewise, Scott, a second-year high school counselor commented,

> I find myself taking a lot more work home. Typically, when my day was over, no
>
> matter if I stayed a little later or came a little early, that day was over. Now, I
>
> have to work on the weekends to get things typed out, and written out, and done
>
> correctly.

Diminished Sense of Connection with Students

Most of the study participants expressed that the transition to virtual counseling created a diminished sense of connection with students. For example, Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience confided,

> I don't particularly like working with the kids online. I don't get a feel for them. I
>
> feel like you can kind of hide behind the camera. Getting kids to turn on cameras,
>
> getting parents to understand we're not there to view your home. But I think you
>
> lose a little bit in conversation with the kids. It's easy for them to turn it off and
>
> kind of just put this little facade up. Like when they're sitting here, I can see them
>
> fidgeting or it's just a little different. It's just a different feeling. I don't feel like it's
>
> as personal.

Similarly, Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor with over 28 years of experience shared the perception that virtual counseling was,

> Very ineffective. I would have to call kids if they needed to talk about anything.
>
> If it was personal or social, it was a phone conversation. And you're not
>
> connected. So, it was very hard to be a counselor in that atmosphere.

Likewise, Blake, a high school counselor with 15 years of experience reinforced the importance of establishing a human connection and rapport in the following statement,

> To me, we did the best we could. There's no doubt about it. Is it effective? No.
>
> But for counseling, it takes away that connection. The whole idea is human
>
> connection.

Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience, also highlighted the difficulty of interpreting non-verbal communications in the virtual environment, stating,

> I just, I still feel like I couldn't get them. It's really hard to read body language on
>
> Zoom. It's really hard. A lot of them didn't want to turn their camera on because
>
> they did not want me to see their house. I mean, so much of my counseling is
>
> visual. And I want them to see me too.

Virtual Counseling Skills

Study participants also quickly discovered that virtual counseling necessitated different skills and abilities than counseling in a traditional school environment. All of the school counselors in this study expressed that they initially felt unprepared to conduct virtual school counseling sessions and activities given the quick unanticipated shift to virtual counseling. Many of the participants expressed concern with how their counseling skills and processes translated to virtual settings. For example, Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience confided,

> Being able to read people just through the camera, being able to look at somebody
>
> and kind of decipher whether they're being truthful or they're putting this little
>
> facade up. I think you need to be more aware of their mannerisms, things like that,
>
> to try to get through it. Some of it is communication pieces too, knowing when to
>
> pause and let kids talk, because you can read that sometimes in an office, but it's
>
> hard on a camera, right? Because you're just not getting that feel.

Similarly, Sally, an experienced elementary school counselor with over 25 years of experience shared,

> It was a pretty big impact on knowing how to reach kids and how to best meet
> their needs now because when they're face-to-face, you can see them, you know
> what's happening. You can tell when they're having a bad day, you can reach out
> to them and you didn't know that when they were off wherever. I had to do a
> suicidal risk assessment via the phone with a kid and a parent at 10 o'clock at
> night, so it was hard because you can't actually see them and gauge how they're
> feeling.

Confidentiality in the virtual environment was an additional concern expressed by eight of the 11 participants. For example, Sam, a middle school counselor with over 8 years of experience stated,

> My first concern was confidentiality. Typically, that's such a bedrock of the
> counseling relationship and to be able to provide confidentiality in an online
> forum was difficult. Just not knowing that my own children were at home and
> even though I'm in a separate room, if my nine-year-old was going to walk in and
> need something. I had a student talk to me about an issue of sensitive nature that
> required me to seek out DSS. And while having that conversation via Zoom, I was
> very concerned that that person's parent guardian could come in the back door
> where they were talking.

Similarly, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared,

> A lot of times, whereas in a brick-and-mortar building, you'd have the student and
> have your door closed, and you felt like that conversation was private and you had

no idea if it was private or not on Zoom. And I think I felt that more from the

students than on my side because I could feel they're like, "No, my mom's right

over there." But even me in my house. I have an older son and daughter and a

husband. I didn't want them hearing what I was talking about. So, it was a lot of

confidentiality issues that were hard to overcome.

Likewise, Sam, a middle school counselor with over 8 years of experience stated,

One of the students definitely needed to divulge information that was going on

within the home. And that student had a very difficult time trying to divulge what

was going on with four siblings and their parents still in the house. Dealing with

that very sensitive nature information confidentially via virtual counseling was

very difficult.

Virtual School Counseling Successes

Each of the interview participants also asserted the transition to virtual counseling offered

several silver linings and unexpected areas of personal and organizational growth. Interview

participants identified two distinct advantages that emerged because of transitioning to virtual

counseling, including: 1) enhanced technology skills and 2) utilization of technology to expand

virtual services to students and families. The following sections present the data gained relating

to each of the aforementioned areas to provide insight on school counselors' perceptions about

enhancements gained through the transition to virtual counseling.

Enhanced Technology Skills

All the study participants reported enhancing their technology skills as a result of

transitioning to virtual school counseling. Several participants shared how they adopted growth

mindsets to overcome technology challenges in the transition to virtual counseling. For example, Hanna, a high school counselor with 17 years of experience stated,

> I was very, very proud and it increased my confidence in our resilience to figure it
> out and get it done. But it also showed me that we all needed some level of
> support, no matter where we were in this, that we had to support each other as
> well. Because just like a lot of the teachers, we were thrust into learning a lot of
> technology real fast. So if I created something, sharing it, it was matter of, okay,
> what do you have that I can use?

Similarly, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared a technology related growth mindset in the following statement,

> I think the lessons that we learned about video conferencing has opened up a lot
> more opportunity for us to get professional development or to have meetings…So
> I think it forced me to start thinking about different ways to interact, different
> ways to collaborate.

This sense of accomplishment was also expressed by Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor with over 28 years of experience who shared,

> Having to learn Zoom and do IGPs through Zoom and Google Meet and all of
> that, that was probably my biggest fear and challenge. But I think that was
> probably my biggest takeaway from that is my ability to take it online if I have to
> do so. And I'm still doing stuff online all the time, and I feel much more
> comfortable in doing it, and effective.

Utilization of Technology to Expand Services

Another silver lining found in the transition to virtual counseling was the utilization of technology to expand virtual services to students and families. Many participants in the study noted that even after in-person instruction resumed in brick-and-mortar buildings, virtual counseling services were here to stay. For example, Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience confided,

> We became electronic. We took all of our forms and have everything converted so we can easily shoot a parent out documentation, things that they need. The parents really liked it and I think they still do. We are still doing our IGPs totally virtually. The kids are coming down [to the counseling office], but the parents are joining us in their offices. And so that's helpful. We can talk about it. They don't have to take the time off from work to drive all the way over here to come in, to meet with us.

Likewise, Sally, an experienced elementary school counselor with over 25 years of experience shared,

> We have parents that now will do a Google Meet for their conference during their lunch hour, whereas before they had to get off work and come in. Now they can just go hop on their phone and we have a conference.

Virtual School Counselor Recommendations

Reflecting on both the challenges and successes in transitioning to being a virtual counselor, each of the interview participants offered recommendations for other school counselors. The recommendations focused on the importance of seeking support from colleagues, maintaining a focus on serving students, and adopting a growth mindset. The

following sections present additional insights on school counselors' recommendations for other

counselors.

Seek Support from Colleagues

Most of the study participants expressed the importance and value of seeking support

from colleagues. School counselors described the networks they utilized to develop best

practices during the transition to virtual counseling. For example, Sally, an experienced

elementary school counselor with over 25 years of experience shared,

> Have lots of tricks in the tool bag. I mean, just be open and reach out to your
>
> colleagues because we were all panicking at the same time. How do we do this?
>
> So I was reaching out to counselors I'd worked with previously and saying, "okay,
>
> how are y'all doing this at your school? Because we aren't real sure which way to
>
> go."

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience also

recommended,

> Observe multiple counselors. We're all different. Everybody does it a different
>
> way. As long as we're getting to the same end result, we're okay. And just find
>
> what works for you.

Focus on Serving Students

School counselors also emphasized the importance of keeping the focus on serving

students in sustaining momentum and effective student services. For example, Scott, a second-

year high school counselor shared, "You have to get to know your individual students."

Similarly, Brenda, a high school counselor with over 10 years of experience stated,

> I think just kind of staying on top of what your students are doing. Knowing who is missing a lot of days, if you're able to have the information about who is out on quarantine, so that you're kind of checking in with those students.

Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience asserted,

> You have to remember when you chose to go into this field, well you chose to work with children. You chose to help children. You're preparing them for tomorrow, you're preparing them for the future. So sometimes we have to go back and remember why we chose what we chose. You didn't choose it to be, I don't know, famous, popular, or to be into a certain group. You chose to help kids. But if you can just remember that you're touching the lives of these kids, you're helping these parents who need support, who some of them don't have the support. You're making a difference, even when you don't see it.

Several counselors in the study described how maintaining a focus on students during this time of uncertainty helped them to personalize their outreach to students. For example, Sofia, a first-year high school counselor shared,

> Be patient. Not every student is the same. And I'm telling you, when I came to this school, that opened my eyes immediately. Every student is not the same. You cannot approach each student the same way. You can't expect for all the students to want the same thing. Not all students want to go to college and that's okay. Not all students want to go to the military. That's okay. Every student is unique and you just have to adjust. You believe in them and just start helping them to believe in themselves and just guide from behind.

Maintain a Growth Mindset

The importance of maintaining a growth mindset was described by most participants in the study as an essential element of their success in transitioning to the virtual counseling role. Study participants also expressed the need to maintain a growth mindset to continue to make school counseling improvements. For example, Hanna, a high school counselor with 17 years of experience stated,

> I tell new counselors is that we need you. We need your ideas. Do not be afraid to share what you know and to share how you might do something different. Don't sit back. Don't be the person to wait and see if someone else is going to do it or have an idea. Bring the idea to the table. We need to hear what you got to say.

Similarly, Scott, a second-year high school counselor commented,

> I would give them the advice of number one, being a lot more flexible. Continue to work on your flexibility and not being rigid on things that may seem a one plus one. I would also ask that they continue to develop professionally, because we don't know what the future may hold. I know that COVID exposed a lot of holes in things that we thought we were doing right, so I would ask them to not just rely on their program, to continue to develop professionally on their own, and through their district, and through their school, and through their administration, because it's different specifically for each school, and each student, and each parent. So continue to develop and continue to be a lot more flexible.

Additionally, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience recommended,

> You need to find out what is the vision of the leadership of your school. Meaning the principal administration, that is key. In order for your counseling program to be effective, you have to find out what is the vision of leadership. And implement

services, implement programs that will support that person's or that team's vision.
Because when you fall in line with what that school improvement plan is and
what the administrative team sees, then there will be a greater respect for the
counseling program and the services that you offer and the support to go along
with it. Having an open mindset, you have to be a team player.

Discussion

School counselors participating in this study characterized the transition to virtual
counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic as extremely challenging and stressful. The findings
from this study indicate the COVID-19 pandemic had a powerful influence on school counselor
confidence and self-efficacy. It is noteworthy that all of the study participants reported the shift
to virtual counseling initially decreased their self-efficacy and confidence in their own school
counseling skills. Insights shared by school counselors about the challenges they encountered as
well as how adoption of a growth mindset produced silver linings, provide valuable and
actionable continuous improvement steps for enhancing counselor self-efficacy in virtual
counseling.

It is critically important to consider how administrators can support their P12 school
counselors in strengthening their virtual counseling skills as well as their own confidence
working in virtual counseling environments. School counselors noted several common
challenges in virtual counseling environments, including difficulty maintaining accountability
and contact with students, decreased sense of work/life balance, diminished sense of connection
with students, and lack of preparation to conduct virtual school counseling. Administrators can
utilize these findings and implications for practice to support school counselors in several
substantive ways.

1. Utilizing strategic planning and budgeting to meaningfully reduce school counselor-to-student case load size. The shift to virtual counseling further emphasized the time intensive work required to sustain relationships and meaningful connections with students. Counseling in virtual environments necessitates reduction of school counselor student case loads for effective provision of services.

2. Collaborating with school counselors to better define their roles, decrease role ambiguity, and remove non-counseling related tasks from their job responsibilities consistent with the ASCA model. This role definition will also help counselors find a better work/life balance.

3. Providing time for collaboration with other school counselors to practice counseling skills and processes in virtual counseling settings. Findings from this study indicate that school counselors felt unprepared for the transition to virtual counseling. Providing the necessary time for skill development and reflection will enhance counselor confidence in their virtual counseling skills.

4. Investing in continuing professional development and learning opportunities in virtual counseling. Findings from this study indicate school counselors are concerned about confidentiality in virtual counseling environments. Providing professional development and the opportunity to explore best practices in ensuring confidentiality can address these concerns. Conferring with district legal counsel will help alleviate some counselor concerns.

5. Ensuring school counselors are recognized as a valuable member of the administrative leadership team. The transition to virtual work environments for principals, teachers and school counselors involved different experiences. However, there may be great synergies

and learning opportunities afforded by comparing lessons learned and continuous

improvement recommendations.

6. Recognizing how growth mindsets enhanced the transition to virtual school counseling

   and counselor self-efficacy. Administrators can foster a continued focus on adopting and

   exercising growth mindsets through encouraging team learning and collaboration.

Study Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

While this study found strong consistency in the challenges and successes school

counselors experienced as they transitioned to virtual counseling, an analysis of the study's

methodology indicates several potential limitations and recommendations for future research.

The study was conducted within one southeastern state using a basic qualitative approach which

may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized. Future research studies

incorporating multiple states, a larger and more diverse sample of school counselors, and

different methodological techniques may improve the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

The examination of school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual counseling

during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the factors influencing their self-efficacy as well as

the successes and challenges they experienced provide valuable insights for how schools can

foster growth mindsets and support the enhancement of virtual counseling experiences. The

successes resulting from the transition to virtual counseling, including strengthening of

technology skills and expanding virtual services to students and families highlight the powerful

impact adopting growth mindsets can have within educational environments.

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