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A Comparison of Principal and School Counselor Self-Efficacy During the Pandemic: Lessons to Be Learned

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The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all sectors of society: family, industry, health, and education. In response, the world is trying to figure its way forward despite the new strains of the COVID-19 virus that keep spreading. Federal and state governments have 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, and children are an important component of that equation.

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). Principals are the individuals who are charged with being the instructional leader of the school (Mirfani, 2019; Naidoo, 2019; Westberry, 2020); building relationships with staff, students and community (Ciuffetelli et al., 2011), defining the culture (Cohen et al., 2009; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Kelley et al., 2005), and managing school operations and personnel (Grissom et al., 2015). 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. Considering the role of principals and school counselors, little research exists on the COVID-19 impact on these two important positions.

The purpose of this research is to compare the impact of COVID-19 on self-efficacy of school principals and P-12 guidance counselors. The pandemic has impacted all other sectors of schooling and with the new focus on increased mental health issues, principals' and guidance counselors' beliefs in their abilities during this time will be integral to successful school transitions for children and parents. Additionally, the study should highlight the role of the principal as a support for the school counselor. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do principals and school counselors describe their experiences transitioning to virtual educational environments?

2. How did the transition to virtual schooling impact principals' and school counselors' confidence levels?

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

Literature Review

Research asserts leadership is a fundamental component of a school's success (Day et al., 2016; Goolamally & Ahmad, 2014; Gurr & Drysdale, 2020; Wallace Foundation, 2016). With increased accountability measures and an increase in societal needs, the demands of the principal have drastically increased. Today's principals are required to not only serve as building managers, but they must also serve as instructional leaders and leaders of school improvement (Hallinger et al. 2018; Kowalski, 2010; Mirfani, 2019; Naidoo, 2019; Westberry, 2020).

In addition, 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 is 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.

The link between counseling behaviors and principal behaviors and effectiveness may be found in the concept of 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 and principals were forced to adapt. Many have never had the opportunity to observe how to effectively provide school services in a virtual environment.

The second assumption addresses intrinsic motivation to learn. School principals and 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., 2020) while principals have noted the same higher level of frustration with the lack of autonomy at the school level (Weiner & Wouflin, 2017) and increased burnout (Skaalvik, 2020). 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 is that principals and counselors must self-regulate learning to create sustainable change and impact self-efficacy. Bandura (1991) states that in order to self-regulate, one must self-monitor one's own behavior, judge those behaviors in relation to personal norms and environmental factors, and affect self-reaction. This self-regulation helps facilitate the successful pursuit of personal goals (Inzlicht et al., 2021). It is important to ensure principals

have the autonomy to formulate those personal goals and have the background schemata necessary to form those goals. Additionally, do principals provide supervisory support for counselors 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 virtual school counselor self-efficacy when considering the domains of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (2012) that keep the development of the whole student at the forefront to bridge counseling and education. Did the pandemic impact counselor self-efficacy? A 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 guidance curriculum, individual guidance, responsive services, and system support that yields results in improved student achievement, attendance, and discipline. (ASCA, 2012)

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.

Principals with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to persevere through the challenges faced in schools and positively impact teacher self-efficacy (Li & Liu, 2020; Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Sehgal et al., 2017). In fact, a principal's self-efficacy has a positive correlation to the collective self-efficacy of a school (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2020; Supriadi & Suryana, 2021). This collective self-efficacy is the confidence that all of the individuals (teacher, student and principal) as well as the collective whole will be able to carry out the behaviors of teaching and learning (Bandura, 1997). These self-confident beliefs have previously shown evidence as predictive behaviors in academics (Bandura, 1997).

In consequence to the pandemic, societal norms (isolation and social distancing) as well as individual beliefs (safety) changed; the question remains if the collective self-efficacy that once existed still remains. Administrators have the responsibility to grow capacity in their buildings (Brown, 2015; Stringer & Hourani, 2016), and this includes supporting school counselors. However, the pandemic's impact on school counselors may not leave room for more responsibilities and additional capacity building.

Methodology

Several research designs have been utilized to investigate K-12 teachers' self-efficacy in transitioning to virtual instruction. However, research studies have not focused on comparing principals' and school counselors' self-efficacy and experiences in transitioning to virtual educational environments. The complexity of the transition to the virtual principalship and counselor, as well as the myriad of challenges associated with leading and counseling in virtual

environments, necessitate a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy, 2017). As a result, this study employs a basic qualitative research design, including qualitative structured interviews to gain in-depth insight about principals and school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual educational environments.

A basic qualitative design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on principals and school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual work, how the transition influenced their confidence, and the successes and challenges they experienced. Leavy (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 principals and 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 educational environments. The interview questions focused upon four important areas including, the transition to virtual leadership and school counseling, how the transition influenced their confidence level, successes and challenges they experienced, as well as advice they would give other colleagues. 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 four-week period.

Research Participants

This study included interviews of 21 research study participants who recently gained experience as a virtual principal, superintendent, or school counselor during the shift to online instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study included 10 principals and superintendents serving within K-12 schools or districts in a Southeastern state. Principal and superintendent participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to de-identify the research participants.

Table 1

Principal Demographic Characteristics

Participants (n=10)	Principal Experience	Gender	Race
1. Melanie	13 Years, High School	Female	African American
2. Hanna	8 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
3. Jack	1 Year, High School	Male	African American
4. Donna	3 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
5. Hudson	3 Years, High School	Male	African American
6. John	4 Years, High School	Male	Caucasian
7. Christina	17 Years, Superintendent	Female	Caucasian
8. Don	29 Years, Superintendent	Male	Caucasian
9. Kay	9 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
10. Bell	5 Years, Middle and High School	Female	African American

Eleven school counselors serving within K-12 schools in a southeastern state also participated in the study. School counselor participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 2. The participants in this study were diverse in years of educational leadership experience, race,

and gender, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample to be generalizable to a wider population of K-12 principals.

Table 2

School Counselor 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

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 principal and school counselors' transition to virtual counseling (Braun

& Clarke, 2006). Analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. Previous research literature on educational leadership, school counseling, and self-efficacy assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study's data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

Results

Principals, superintendents, and 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 principals and school counselors describe their experiences transitioning to virtual educational environments? 2.) How did the transition to virtual schooling impact principals' and school counselors' confidence levels? 3.) How do principals and school counselors describe their successes and challenges associated with the transition to virtual educational environments? Research participant responses were strikingly similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race and ethnicity.

Self-Efficacy in the Virtual Environment

An analysis of the individual interview data highlights the vast majority of the principals interviewed in this research study reported the transition to the virtual principalship initially rattled their confidence level as an instructional leader. In fact, most principals participating in this study used the term "flying by seat of our pants" when describing the transition to virtual leadership. Hanna, an experienced high school principal elaborated on her transition to virtual leadership,

> This is year nine for me in this seat and after a while you get to a point where you
>
> feel like you've seen pretty much everything and how to handle everything. And
>
> what it did was it basically took me down to being a first-year principal again in

some cases. I'll be honest in saying that unlike first-year principals who you know

are first-year principals and people are giving them support, I think we all felt like

first-year principals again in so many cases. No one knew how to support us

because they were flying by seat of their pants too in terms of what is needed.

When asked how the transition to virtual influenced her confidence, Donna, a high school

principal with three years of experience, chuckled and stated,

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being confident, any day walking into my building I feel

I'm at a nine. With virtual, I'd put myself at a three maybe a four.

Similarly, all of the school counselor participants also reported the transition to virtual

counseling initially decreased their confidence level and effectiveness. 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.

Moreover, all of the school counselors participating in this study viewed the transition as more

difficult than counseling 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.

Difficulty Maintaining Accountability

Virtual Principals

Maintaining accountability of systems, teaching effectiveness, and student achievement were areas that emerged as being influential throughout the principal and district leader interviews. For example, Christina, a school superintendent with extensive experience, asserts that virtual principals must be "more deliberate and more thoughtful about the needs of our teachers, what type of professional development they need, their learning, and what experiences they need." Hudson, a high school principal with three years of experience, describes his school's approach to systematizing professional development in the following excerpt,

> Modeling the model. When our instructional team does professional development, they try to model some of the best practices in engaging teachers just like we would hope teachers are engaging their students… It takes a lot of time, but we've tried to do what we call personalized professional development because we know

that our teachers are in such different places, again modeling the model, because

our students are also in such different places. We meet the teacher where they are.

Hudson further elaborates,

A teacher who was one of the most dynamic teachers face-to-face may be one of

the least dynamic teachers because they don't have the skills. And I always go

back to a skill gap versus a will gap. I think in most cases, you see teachers who

have a skill gap…and so with our personalized PD we're really meeting them

where they are.

Coaching and investments in professional development as part of the systems approach

emerged as a key finding for maintaining accountability from several interview participants. For

example, Kay, an experienced high school principal stated,

The coaching model became more integral when we were completely online.

Being there for teachers with words of encouragement and the expertise to say

have you tried this…have you tried that, and even more importantly, talk to this

person…. It was important for me to have a really good handle on who among

my faculty and staff had this down, who were the go-to people, as well as who is

my best building site technology guru in terms of software and hardware systems.

Virtual School Counselors

All of 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.

Work/Life Balance Challenges

Virtual Principals

During the individual interviews, all 10 principals and superintendents identified maintaining work/life balance and sustaining frequent communications as a critical challenge in transitioning to the virtual principal role. The ability to navigate different expectations for presence and communication associated with the 24/7 nature of virtual learning is represented by the comments of a current principal highlighted below. When asked about the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by virtual principals, Kay, an experienced high school principal, states,

What I did find from the leadership position was how important it was to be accessible almost round the clock, twenty-four seven, to faculty, to staff, to parents, and even to students. I made sure that all of my school community had my cell phone… I'd begin at least 6:30 in the morning and usually did not end until 10:30 at night in terms of communication. And that would be individual communication but also beginning immediately routinized at least weekly if not biweekly communication with parents and with faculty and staff.

Melanie, a high school principal with extensive experience, states as a virtual principal she "doesn't have an office, the school is my office." Similarly, Jack, a first-year principal, reports he frequently "pops into online classes to show visibility" and states, "Communication in the virtual environment should be more. It's more important. Because we don't have these students in the building."

Virtual School Counselors

Counselor 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.

Technological Challenges

Virtual Principals

The importance of virtual principals developing a strong knowledge of technology capabilities was also noted by 100% of the interview participants as challenge they navigated in the transition to virtual work. Most interview respondents also expressed a desire for additional professional development in better understanding current and emerging technologies. This sentiment is highlighted in the following statement by Hanna, an experienced high school principal, who describes her transition to being a virtual principal,

> All of a sudden, I had to be much more techno-savvy than I ever thought I could possibly be. And learning all of the different programs and things that would be best for my teachers. Trying to find avenues for our career and technical classes that are so hands on …. and what can I purchase to make the transition easier for them.

Christina, a school superintendent with extensive experience, highlights the importance of professional development in this area.

> Technology skills…. I had to go to a lot of sessions and professional development myself and I've realized that our teachers need a plethora of professional development so they feel comfortable teaching virtually.

Kay, an experienced high school principal, reinforces this in the following quote,

> [Virtual principals] need to have a sense of what is possible versus being a technology expert. Have a sense of what the technology is available and can do in the instructional environment…It's beyond principalship 101. I've been doing this for 30 years, so I don't need Principalship 101. We need the things that are timely and useful in the moment. We need people directing professional development

programs to look ahead. Technology is a way of life and must be embraced for learning. We can't avoid it any longer….this door is open it is not going away.

Virtual School Counselors

Most of the study participants expressed that the transition to virtual counseling created technology challenges which diminished their 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.

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.

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.

Silver Linings in the Virtual Environment

Virtual Principals

Each of the interview participants also asserted the transition to virtual principalship offered several silver linings and unexpected areas of personal and organizational growth. Interview participants identified three distinct advantages that emerged as a result of the transition to virtual principalship, including increased self-efficacy, growth in instructional leadership skills, and enhanced team cohesion.

During the individual interviews, all 10 principals and superintendents expressed self-efficacy and confidence gains resulting from the transition to the virtual principalship. Donna, a high school principal with three years-experience, shared,

>I've become stronger. I've spent more time on curriculum than I've been able to
>in the past. I do feel we are better prepared if we do need to shut down…whether
>it's a pandemic, a hurricane, or an ice storm.

Hanna, an experienced high school principal, also shared, "I've had to become really a lot more savvy." Similarly, Jack, a first-year principal, shared, "I think I'm an expert now. I can go anywhere and get any job…I've grown leaps and bounds." John, a high school principal with four years of experience, stated,

The confidence factor is huge and feeling like I'm supported by my district is huge as well. So, I've got confidence in what I do on a daily basis now. I'm confident I have confidence from my district because I've produced gains in the years that I've been here that has induced that confidence, but it allowed me to be focused on what I think is probably the most critical aspect of leadership during this time, which is keeping the morale and the mindset of teachers checked in. So, I say one thing we've done successfully is we've had a tremendous focus on supporting our teachers.

Growth in instructional leadership skills and experiences was a second critical finding identified by the overwhelming majority of interview participants. Hana, an experienced high school principal, stated, "I fought change…I have always [believed] kids need to be in school, they need to be in front of teachers...I guess I wish I wouldn't have been so stubborn." When asked if the transition to virtual had impacted her instructional leadership, she readily replied,

Yeah, it really has. It was an "aha" moment for me when I realized when I was popping into these classrooms and I'm having these conversations with teachers how much I really didn't know what was going on in my building. Even though I thought I did, even though I thought I had a good handle on it. That's when you see your weaknesses.

Likewise, Melanie, an experienced high school principal, commented,

You gotta look at the details of everything. And I think even as a brick and mortar leader, I paid attention to those little things, but now I'm even paying attention

closer to not only what I do, how I do it, but I'm paying attention to my people

and my leadership team as well, to make sure that we are communicating.

All of the principals interviewed expressed that working through the challenges

associated with transitioning to virtual instruction led to enhanced team cohesion. This sentiment

is described by Christina, an experienced superintendent who stated the transition "strengthened

our team." Melanie, a high school principal with over 10 years-experience shared that her team

"communicates even better." She further elaborated that her team has, "Grown even stronger as a

family, working together. We are all in this together – to make it work it's going to take us all."

Similarly, Jack, a first-year principal, shared,

I'm surrounded by a lot of hardworking, dedicated people who understand the

struggles of this community and want to see change and want to see our progress

and move in the right direction.

Virtual School Counselors

Each of the school counselors interviewed 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.

All of 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,

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.

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.

Counselors felt that additional silver linings could be realized if network development and utilization became a key tool of school counselors. School counselors described the networks they utilized to develop best practices during the transition to virtual counseling. Therefore, counselors highlight the importance of seeking support from colleagues, maintaining a focus on serving students, and adopting a growth mindset.

Discussion

Principals and school counselors experienced many commonalities in the transition to virtual work. Both principals and school counselor participants in this study characterized the transition to virtual work during the COVID-19 pandemic as extremely difficult, challenging, and stressful. The findings from this study indicate the COVID-19 pandemic had a powerful initial influence on decreasing principals' and school counselors' confidence and self-efficacy. The principals and school counselors participating in this study identified three common salient categories of challenges associated with the transition to virtual work, including difficulty maintaining accountability, decreased work/life balance, and the need to learn new technology.

The emergence of silver linings, gained through the transition to virtual principalship and virtual school counseling was an additional commonality between the two participant groups. Principals and district leaders identified three distinct advantages that emerged as a result of the transition to virtual principalship, including increased self-efficacy and confidence, growth in

instructional leadership skills, and enhanced team cohesion. School counselors identified two silver linings afforded through the transition to virtual counseling, including enhanced technology skills as well as the utilization of technology to expand virtual services to students and families. However, it is valuable to note that school counselors also described these expanded virtual services as a source of work/life balance stress.

While principals and school counselors both identified gains through the transition to virtual work, the silver linings and feelings of support were much more positively pronounced for principals. Principals reported experiencing more support, increases in self-efficacy, and successes resulting from the transition to virtual leadership than school counselors. These differences highlight important implications for practice in increasing support for school counselors.

Reflecting on both the challenges and successes in transitioning to being a virtual counselor, each of the school counselors 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. Principals can utilize these recommendations as well as drawing upon lessons learned from their own transition to virtual work to support school counselors in several critical ways.

1. Meaningfully reduce school counselor-to-student case load sizes to support the time intensive work required to sustain relationships and meaningful connections with students in the virtual counseling environment.

2. Partner with school counselors to achieve an effective work/life balance through the development of systems for virtual counseling and removal of non-counseling related job duties consistent with the ASCA model.

3. Emphasize the importance of collaboration with other school counselors to practice virtual counseling skills and processes. Providing time and reflection opportunities for these collaborative experiences will reinforce their importance.

4. Investing in continuing professional development and learning opportunities in virtual counseling to foster skill development, self-efficacy, and growth mindsets.

Study Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

While this study found strong consistency in the challenges and successes principals and 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 principals and school counselors, and different methodological techniques may improve the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

The comparison of principal and school counselors' experiences transitioning to virtual environments 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 gain synergies from commonalities and differences in lessons learned. In this study, principals reported experiencing more support and successes resulting from the transition to virtual leadership than school counselors, providing several important implications for practice in increasing support for school counselors.

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