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## The personal and professional impact of COVID-19 on school counselors: An exploratory study.

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## The personal and professional impact of COVID-19 on school counselors: An exploratory study.

### Abstract

School Counselors historically have faced multiple challenges that impact their lives personally and professionally. Due to numerous and competing demands, school counselors are likely to experience a plethora of stressors including role conflict, high student to school counselor ratios, minimal support, and increasing mental health needs of students. The COVID 19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges by changing and adding to the responsibilities of school counselors, reducing access to appropriate support systems, and increasing students' needs for counseling services. This qualitative, exploratory study utilized phenomenological inquiry to examine the impact of these challenges on school counselors' personal and professional lives. The research questions focus on how Covid 19 impacted school counselor roles, their personal lives, and how they coped with the impact of COVID 19 on their personal and professional lives. The study consisted of eight participants who were licensed school counselors in two Midwestern states. The findings included themes of minimal training in moving to an online platform, increase in role conflict and non-school counselor duties, minimal support and resources, and increased burnout. Implications for the profession include the need for school counselors to receive training in technology and virtual environments, being mindful of assigning non-counseling duties, and ensuring that school counselors have organizational and administrative support, access to supervision, and adequate resources to help prevent feelings of burnout.

### Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, School Counselors, Burnout

### Author Bio

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## **Introduction**

The School Counseling profession has often lacked a clear identity which the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) has tried to clarify, especially in recent years (DeKruffy et al., 2013). ASCA (2012) now has set standards of what expectations and duties of a school counselor can entail. While this has helped to clarify the role of the school counselor, there are several factors that contribute to wide variations of these standards (Hann-Morrison, 2011), which can lead to role conflict, overwhelming work demands, and burnout. These factors include but are not limited to having numerous and competing demands, lack of necessary resources, and the need to address the interpersonal and mental health needs of students, as well as be responsive to changing needs and events impacting students and schools, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. With the multiple demands already placed on school counselors, and the invaluable role they play in student success, it is important to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their professional and personal lives.

Literature will be reviewed on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school counselors, the role of the school counselor, the numerous and competing demands placed on school counselors that can lead to role conflict and stress as well as burnout and the impact on school counselors' job performance and well-being. Role theory will be used as the conceptual framework for the literature review in order to provide context for understanding the professional and personal impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on school counselors. Currently there is minimal research on how COVID-19 has impacted school counselors and their ability to support students (Strear et al., 2021). The present study seeks to fill this gap by utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the impact COVID-19 has had on school counselors. A

phenomenological approach was utilized to explore participants' lived experiences regarding the impact COVID-19 has had on their personal and professional lives.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Personal and Professional Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on School Counselors**

The pandemic has impacted individuals across the nation. Social and economic strife, isolation, social distancing, and an abundance of uncertainty have led to increased feelings of helplessness, frustration, fear, loneliness, and sadness (Khan et al., 2020). Additionally, individuals are likely to have experienced a shift in work-life balance as a result of the pandemic (Putri & Amran, 2021). Such is especially true for school counselors. Alongside any personal impact school counselors may have faced as a result of the pandemic, school counselors also experienced significant changes and additional demands in their work. According to Role Theory, Individuals occupy multiple roles throughout their lives, and successful management of these roles can be challenging (Swanson et al., 2005). In addition to the role of school counselor, individuals are managing other roles outside of their work life (e.g., parent, caretaker, provider, spouse/partner). Coping with these various roles is becoming increasingly complex and associated with increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Swanson et al., 2005). Regarding the management of work and home roles, Frone et al. (1992) discussed the permeability of work and home boundaries. Home boundaries are consistently more permeable than work boundaries. Stated differently, individuals' work roles can have a significant impact on their home life, especially if work roles become stressful and unmanageable. This especially rings true for school counselors during the pandemic as increased duties and changing responsibilities spilled over into their home life.

In October of 2020, the American School Counseling Association surveyed 7,000 school counselors to gather information on daily challenges and the impact of the pandemic (ASCA, 2021). Participants identified additional responsibilities that have increased under COVID-19 which include “managing student schedules, additional paperwork related to hybrid structures, community engagement activities, additional meetings with building leadership, and learning new technology platforms” (p. 10). One participant stated “I feel like I’ve been on call. I’ve been working 12-15 hours per day, including weekends” (p. 10). Another participant stated, “The day never ends. Very few boundaries” (p. 10). This speaks to how when school counselors’ roles become stressful and unmanageable, this can have an impact on their homelife and personal wellbeing. Participants identified their biggest challenges as having access to students in a virtual environment and providing counseling and lessons to students in a virtual environment. Participants identified these tasks as extremely challenging. Participants identified their next biggest challenges as managing high caseloads and being assigned inappropriate duties. Most of the participants indicated that job responsibilities have changed as a result of the pandemic. The survey found that 73% of the participants spent time following up with students who had not participated in virtual classes, 53% stated that their time was spent following up with students who have not returned since schools have reopened, 48% participate in attendance and check-ins, 48% of respondents indicated an increase in responsibility for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation, and 34% indicated that they have new or additional duties including bus, hall, lunch duty.

Similarly, Savitz-Romer et al. (2021) surveyed school counselors ( $n=1,060$ ) to examine their professional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the major findings, school counselors identified that they struggled to enact their roles during COVID-19 as a result of

barriers faced and a lack of support. The barriers stemmed from school leaders focusing their attention on teachers and instructional issues and rarely asked school counselors for their input. School counselors were given little direction and guidance and were not part of the communication regarding how their roles would shift due to the pandemic, leaving counselors to define their own roles. Participants also identified that there was an increase in non-counseling related responsibilities that led to role overload. Participants indicated that they were not allotted time to implement class lessons.

The aforementioned survey and study highlight the challenges experienced by school counselors during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Given the invaluable role school counselors play in the school setting and in the lives of students, focus needs to be given to the personal and professional impact of COVID on school counselors. In order to better understand this impact, it is important to explore the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, as well as stressors that can impact personal and professional wellbeing that can lead to burnout.

### **The role of school counselors and students' mental health**

One of the main roles of school counselors is to address the mental health needs of students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), in any given year, between 13% and 20% of children experience a mental health disorder. Given school counselors' access to students with mental health issues, they are a well-situated resource to provide short-term clinical-based interventions to address the mental health of children and adolescents (Collins, 2014). School counselors must respond to the immediate mental and emotional needs of students and work with them to address interpersonal and psychological issues that can interfere with their development and education (Neyland-Brown et al., 2019). These interpersonal concerns can include domestic abuse and substance use in the home, neglect, mood disorders of

both the student and family members, among a plethora of other concerns (Hann-Morrison, 2011).

School counselors often identify mental health concerns before families due to the amount of time students spend in school (Pincus et al., 2020). According to Farmer et al. (2003), 70% of the mental health care received by children and adolescents takes place in the school. Prior to the pandemic, the mental health needs of school-aged students in the United States had reached concerning levels. Additionally, increased levels of depression, PTSD, substance abuse, and suicide are expected in students returning from lockdown (Pincus et al., 2020). School counselors may be the only professional with mental health training that the child or adolescent is interacting with. Further, there can be several barriers for referring to outside mental health services including lack of follow up, transportation, cost, lack of availability, etc. It is for these reasons that the school is the main setting for resolution of students' mental health issues.

In addition to addressing mental health and interpersonal needs, school counselors are often crisis counselors due to the ever-changing needs of students and are called upon to tend to crises that arise (Walley et al., 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought crisis situations that demand school counselors' time and attention. According to the American School Counselor Association (2016), it is the school counselor's responsibility to provide direct services before and after a crisis event. According to Karaman et al. (2020), "Students have been shown among the groups with the most psychological difficulties during this period" (p. 2). Additionally, following the COVID-19 Pandemic, children experienced difficulties adapting and as a result, experienced learning difficulties that in turn increased their anxiety. Golberstein et al. (2020) discussed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health and social, emotional, psychological, and educational well-being of young people. Students who receive

mental health services during and after a crisis are more able to resolve issues in a healthy way and more easily adapt to daily life (Udwin et al., 2000). As a result, school counselors are expected to address mental health and crisis needs stemming from COVID-19. As school counselors are often assigned non-counseling responsibilities and large caseloads, meeting the increased mental health needs of students may prove difficult and add to the role conflict and stress experienced already by school counselors.

### **The Role of School Counselors and Role Conflict**

According to role theory, a role can be seen as a set of norms and expectations of behavior assigned by significant others to a specific position (Swanson et al., 2005). Significant others refer to individuals and entities who share a stake in the specific position. For school counselors, this includes students, parents, teachers, school administration, and licensing/credentialing bodies. The American School Counseling Association (2012) has a set of standards outlining the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, which has aided in clarifying the role of the school counselor. School counselors deliver numerous direct and indirect services in varying formats including individual counseling, group counseling, prevention programs, and consultation with parents and teachers. School counselors are also advocating for students and implementing evaluations of services provided. School counselor activities have been centered on students' academic, social, and emotional development as well as career development, college preparation, and mental health (Fan et al., 2019).

Despite best practices being established, there can be disparities between the actual practices of school counselors and best practices (Wei-Cheng et al., 2016). School counselors are often assigned a plethora of non-counseling related duties which include test coordination, scheduling, discipline, maintaining records, and administrative tasks (Chandler et al., 2018;

Randick et al., 2019). School counselors must often split their time between counseling and non-counseling related duties, which takes time away from more appropriate counseling activities (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Due to the multiple roles and responsibilities of school counselors, role conflict is common and has been an ongoing issue for school counselors (Chandler et al., 2018; Culbreth et al., 2005; Freeman & Coll, 1997; Neyland-Brown et al., 2019). According to role theory, Ivey and Robin (1966) assert that “Role conflict occurs in a situation in which there is a systematic difficulty involved in assuming, maintaining a role, or functioning in a role situation” (p. 30). Role conflict can be described as experiencing two or more role pressures at the same time, so that meeting expectations of one makes it more difficult to comply with the other (Kahn et al., 1964). There are several factors that contribute to role conflict in school counselors (Freeman & Coll, 1997).

School counselor positions can often lack clear prioritization of roles as well as the accommodation of new roles as expectations and responsibilities can often fluctuate depending on the needs and perceptions of various stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administration and other school personnel) (Freeman & Coll, 1997). Role conflict arises when school counselors depart from their trained role as a counselor and contribute large amounts of time to non-counseling duties (Culbreth et al., 2005). For example, a school counselor may not be able to spend as much time as needed engaging in counseling-related functions due to spending large amounts of time engaging in administrative and other non-counseling related duties. This role conflict contributes to school counselors’ experiencing role stress (Culbreth et al., 2005; Freeman & Coll, 1997).

### **Role Stress, Work-related stressors, and Performance of School Counselor**

Role theory asserts that there is a potential for role stress when expectations of an individual are confusing, conflicting, and uncertain (Kahn et al., 1964). Bryant and Constantine (2006) identified role conflict and role ambiguity as specific work-related stressors that occur for school counselors regarding their numerous roles. Role ambiguity happens when responsibilities are not clearly defined (Culbreth et al., 2005) and information about clear expectations is lacking (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011). According to Lambie (2007), “Professional school counselors experience high levels of stress because of multiple demands, role ambiguity, large caseloads, and lack of clinical supervision” (p. 82). School counselors with elevated levels of role ambiguity are more likely to experience work-related stress and burnout (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). Despite clear expectations from the American School Counseling Association outlining the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, school counselors often find themselves in positions where there is no defined role or the role is not congruent with their training (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011). This can impede personal wellness and lead to work-related stress and impairment (Young & Lambie, 2007).

School counselors are especially at risk for harmful levels of stress due to their numerous responsibilities and various roles, and this chronic stress can lead to emotional and physical problems on a personal level (McCarthy et al., 2010). High levels of stress are also correlated to low levels of job satisfaction and direct service delivery to students (Randick et al., 2019). Stressors can stem from role conflict and large student to counselor ratios (Sears & Navin, 1983). According to Gnilka et al. (2015), school counselors often experience high student-to-counselor ratios. There are several states in the United States that do not have a current school counselor to student ratio. The guiding statement from the American School Counseling Association (2016) is

1 to 250. In 2017, the national average school counseling caseload was 482 to 1, almost double the recommended case load size (ASCA, 2017). Higher caseloads can lead to higher levels of perceived stress and being overwhelmed by work demands (McCarthy et al., 2010). Bardhoshi et al. (2014) identified that caseloads of over 400 are related to emotional exhaustion in school counselors. Other challenges and sources of stress include the growing demands put on school counselors, lack of support within the school system, lack of supervision, and emotional exhaustion (Randick et al., 2019).

Further emphasizing the importance of support and supervision in mediating the effects of stress, Mullen and Gutierrez (2016) discussed that higher levels of stress can result from limited resources for coping and little access to clinical supervision. This is concerning as many school counselors experience a lack of support, resources, and access to supervision (Crutchfield et al., 1997; Kim & Lambie, 2018). Experiencing stress over an extensive period of time can lead to emotional and physical health problems, burnout, and increases the likelihood of leaving the profession (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). Mullen et al. (2018) found a strong correlation between perceived stress and burnout in school counselors, “When school counselors experience greater stress, they are likely to experience greater burnout” (p. 5). Findings also indicated that perceived stress and burnout resulted in a strong negative relationship with job satisfaction. Given the relationship between stress and burnout, especially considering the added stress school counselors experienced during the COVID-19 Pandemic, it is crucial to be aware of factors that contribute to burnout as well as factors that help prevent and mediate the effects of burnout. The present study will help to add to the literature in this area by identifying stressors specific to the COVID-19 Pandemic and exploring how school counselors coped with this stress.

### **Burnout and clinical supervision**

According to the American School Counselor Association's ethical standards (2016), school counselors must perform the duties required by the ASCA National Model while also practicing wellness and monitoring their physical and mental health. However, when school counselors experience ongoing stress in their positions, burnout can occur (Mullen & Gutierrez, 2016). Although many definitions of burnout exist, Kim and Lambie (2018) identify the main aspect of burnout as the psychological phenomenon that accompanies job-related stress.

Additionally, burnout can take place when professionals are not able to meet their own needs and their clients' needs in a high-pressure work environment. When burnout is experienced, there is a psychological and behavioral impact on the school counselor's personal life (Holman & Grubbs, 2018). Symptoms of burnout include negative changes in an individual's emotional and mental health; attitudes and decision making; occupational motivation, and physical state (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Experiencing significant burnout relates to lower job commitment and productivity, which results in school counselors providing lower quality services to students (Moyer, 2011).

Additionally, Kim and Lambie (2018) discuss that there are several dimensions of burnout that school counselors can experience which include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is when one's ability to work with students has been exhausted. Depersonalization is when school counselors emotionally and cognitively distance themselves from their job due to not being able to meet the needs of students. The personal accomplishment dimension relates to school counselors feeling that they are not effective at their jobs. Gnilka et al. (2015) found that when compared to other mental health professionals, school counselors had greater levels of exhaustion. When school

counselors become exhausted by their jobs, this can lead to depersonalizing students, which then leads to having a low sense of personal accomplishment (Holman & Grubbs, 2018).

There are eight organizational factors related to school counselors' level of burnout: workplace, non-counseling duties, caseloads, level of principal support, clinical supervision, student-to-counselor ratio, and the perceived work environment (Kim & Lambie, 2018). When the demands of work are high and the resources to address those demands are low, this increases the risk of burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). The organizational factors relating to burnout and lack of resources available for school counselors are reflected in the relevant literature on burnout and school counseling. Bardhoshi et al. (2014) identified areas related to school counselors' feelings of burnout including budget constraints and lack of time, resources, and organizational support. The average school counselor's case load is twice the recommended average student to counselor ratio, which contributes to increased work demands and feelings of burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Kim & Lambie, 2018). School counselors engaging in high levels of non-counseling duties is correlated to burnout. This is reflected in the findings of Bardhoshi et al. (2014), who found that school counselor's non-counseling duties predicted their burnout scores. Additionally, role ambiguity and perceived job satisfaction are significantly related to burnout (Fye et al., 2020).

Clinical supervision, among the organizational factors related to burnout in school counselors, can provide school counselors with the needed support to meet increasing work demands and balance multiple roles. Supervision can serve as a protective factor against burnout, ensure school counselors are practicing ethically, and is instrumental in professional growth (Fye et al., 2020). Additionally, clinical supervision helps mediate stress and overload in school counselors, reduces burnout, helps improve quality of counseling and other services provided,

and improves overall counselor wellness. Fye et al. (2020) found that school counselors receiving satisfactory supervision led to decreased levels of burnout. However, school counselors' supervision is often provided by principals who usually do not have clinical training or a working understanding of school counselors' roles (Leuwerke et al, 2009), which can contribute to role conflict, role ambiguity, and role stress. In school counseling, there is often a need for both administrative and clinical supervision. Administrative supervision, for example, is supervision provided by a principal and clinical supervision should be provided by a counselor who has K-12 experience and is trained in providing clinical supervision. In spite of school counselors' desire for clinical supervision, obtaining appropriate supervision is often challenging (Duncan et al., 2014).

Although there are many benefits of school counselors receiving clinical supervision, it is not a requirement for school counseling licensure post-graduation and as a result, school counselors receive less supervision than other counseling professionals. A study by Duncan et al. (2014) found that 94% of school counselors surveyed were not receiving clinical supervision despite 79% of participants indicating a desire to receive clinical supervision. School counselors with limited access to supervision are more likely to experience burnout (Moyers, 2011) and a lack of supervision has been identified as a predictor for school counselors' feelings of incompetence, frustration with school settings, lack of compassion for students (Randick et al., 2019), and leave school counselors more vulnerable to the effects of work-related stress (Kovac et al., 2017).

Experiencing burnout can significantly impact the quality of services school counselors provide to students (Kim & Lambie, 2018). As school counselors are critical to the mental, emotional, and academic well-being of students, it is important to explore and be mindful of

sources of burnout as well as identify ways to mediate and prevent burnout. Doing so becomes even more important due to the stress and changes brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The research questions focus on how Covid 19 impacted school counselor roles, their personal lives, and how they coped with the impact of COVID 19 on their personal and professional lives. The present study will contribute to the literature by identifying and exploring sources of burnout in school counselors as well as factors that help mediate the effects of burnout.

## **Methodology**

### **Research and Design Paradigm**

This section presents the research design used for the study, the participants, the survey and recording procedure and data collection and analysis, which includes exploratory research as well as ethical considerations along with a summary. An Exploratory Study using a qualitative phenomenological approach was utilized to begin exploring the professional and personal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school counselors. In this exploratory study, the primary raw data came from open-ended survey questions sent out by an email with a link to an anonymous Qualtrics survey. Following raw data analysis, the researchers formulated common responses or themes drawn from the participants' feedbacks. The request for participation was sent out to two midwestern states' professional school counseling listservs in the Spring of the academic year, specifically April. There is no data on response rate due to unknown number of individuals subscribed to these listservs. There were no exclusion/inclusion criteria other than being a licensed school counselor to meet qualifications for participation. The study was potentially biased due to the researchers being acquainted with some of the potential respondents. The researchers addressed this by having no demographic data collected. The sample was not representative of the entire United States' school counseling professionals. There is also a

possibility that some of the licensed school counselors in that state may not have been on the listserv and received the invitation. The researchers also assumed that COVID-19 did exacerbate some of the existing challenges for school counselors due to being involved in the field. The benefits of this research design encompass the participants being able to describe their experiences in their own words with ample time to respond to the posed questions. Utilizing an exploratory phenomenological research design helps provide insight into the phenomena and nature of the problem and the impact on school counselors (Moustakas, 1994). The drawbacks of this research study included having only a small number of participants respond as well as the participants being from only one region of the country as school counselors in different regions of the country may have had different experiences. The last drawback of this study was the potential bias in data collection methods, as the researchers are possibly known to potential participants and assumed that COVID-19 did have an impact on school counselors. The researchers engaged in bracketing throughout the research process and identified any thoughts, feelings, or potential bias that may impact the study. The researcher completing data analysis kept a reflective journal throughout the process. Member checking was not possible due to the responses being anonymous and confidential to protect participants and the research process. The survey questions for this study were as follows:

### **Survey Questions**

1. How have your roles and job duties as a School Counselor been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has the impact of COVID-19 affected your ability to perform school counselor roles?
3. What have you found helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue your work as a school counselor?
4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted you personally?

5. How have the changing demands of your job as a school counselor impacted you personally?
6. How have you coped with the professional and personal changes as a result of the COVID-19?
7. What supports or resources are in place within the school system for you as a school counselor to navigate the changes due to the COVID-19 impact?
8. What would be helpful for you as a school counselor to navigate the changing demands to due COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Participants**

There was a total of 8 participants in this exploratory study. They were all licensed professional school counselors in the state they reside in. The requirement for participation in the study was being a licensed school counselor. The survey was completed on a voluntary basis and none of the eligibility was based on identified race, gender, culture, religion, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic factor. The survey was anonymous, and no identifying data was collected. There is no return or participation rate due to it being unknown of how many individuals are subscribed to the listservs as well as how many licensed school counselors versus non licensed schools' counselors are a part of the listserv. The strategies for trustworthiness included the researcher initially coding as the participant responses were reviewed and utilizing a reflective journal throughout the data analysis process. Member checking was not utilized due to participants being anonymous.

The invitation email requested that the participants complete the survey at their own convenience within the two-week time frame. The participants were emailed at the start of the survey. They were not sent a reminder email. Open-ended interview questions were used to allow the participants to respond in a manner that identified their specific experiences.

## **Sampling procedures**

This research study included an exploratory qualitative phenomenological research design using an anonymous Qualtrics survey for collecting data. The purpose of the study was to explore the phenomenon and identify reactions and perceptions of the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on school counselors involved in this study. The survey questions were designed to explore the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon of interest in this study. The survey questions were developed by the researchers due to this being a qualitative phenomenological study. The timeline for data collection was two weeks following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the invitation email. The first step in the procedure was obtaining IRB approval for the study. The second step was to speak to the individual responsible for the professional school counseling organization email and ask permission to send out the invitation email to participate in the study. The next step was to email the group with the survey link and information on the study. Participants agreed to the implied consent prior to completing the survey. The implied consent contained specific information regarding confidentiality and protection of the participant responses, data destruction procedures, and procedures on withdrawing from the study.

## **Ethical considerations**

The ethical considerations for this study included the researchers' awareness and potential relationships with the participants. This caused potential bias in the data collection. The researchers may have been known to the participants and vice versa. The other potential bias is identification of themes and the COVID 19 pandemic bringing up feelings in the researchers as well that may be consistent or not with participants' responses. None of the responses in the survey included identifying data and all responses were kept confidential.

## Results

The data analysis utilized a phenomenological qualitative process of identifying common themes from the survey data. One of the three researchers read through the data set three times as a whole and then read the data set to identify meaningful statements and keywords. The statements and keywords were then categorized into themes. The codes were identified by lumping coding of finding the essence of the whole excerpts from participant responses (Saldana, 2013). A second researcher reviewed and verified the identified themes from the data. The findings and subsequent themes are organized by survey questions in the following sections.

### **1-How have your roles and job duties as a School Counselor been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Participants commented on several different aspects of their job roles and the changes they have noticed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first common themes were lack of preparation for the transition to online, virtual learning, zoom, and students not being physically present. Participants identified that they did not have adequate time or resources to be able to shift quickly to an online environment for service delivery of school counseling services. One participant responded, “I came back to work as a counselor this year after 5 years and was forced into teaching lessons virtually without any prior experience/knowledge or training.” The rapidly changing delivery methods of the school environment also took a toll on school counselors and the services they could provide to students.

The second theme was taking on the role of a teacher due to staffing shortages during the pandemic. Due to teacher shortages, for a variety of reasons, school counselors were pulled from their normal work expectations to cover classrooms and other teaching duties necessary for the classroom instruction. One participant responded “I am having to teach classes for part of the day

since we are short on teachers.” This illustrates how school counselors often absorb additional non-counseling related duties.

The third theme was the increasing role of paperwork and the large amount of paperwork taking over their job responsibilities. This was noted by 7 out of the 8 participants. They noted more time spent on paperwork and handling the overwhelming amount of work in this regard. One participant noted “Most of my role during the pandemic has become paperwork.”

The fourth theme was logistical constraints of the pandemic including school attendance, internet access, scheduling, etc. This theme was expressed by all 8 participants indicating that they experienced more difficulty in performing their school counseling duties due to outside responsibilities or other duties being assigned to them. Some of the examples of this as noted by the participants included “I worked all summer without additional pay to complete student schedules by calling the students individually and screen sharing to complete the computerized form. I compiled more data on students for administration.”

## **2-How has the impact of COVID-19 affected your ability to perform school counselor roles?**

Participants commented on several aspects of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their ability to perform school counselor roles. The common themes from responses included less time for job responsibilities, difficulties with connection including to students, parents, staff, and community, lack of mental health support or resources and time for these services in terms of delivery within the school, more paperwork, and a need to adapt to technology quickly with no preparation. The participants all responded that they found the connection with students the past year difficult and had to find new ways to adapt which took time. One participant responded “It has been difficult during COVID to connect with students

over the computer.” Another participant responded, “Not having the student here every day greatly affects our ability to make meaningful connections with students.” The connection piece in the school counseling job role has been impacted and made more difficult as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3-What have you found helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue your work as a school counselor?**

Participants responded that the things they have found helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic to support or continue their work as a school counselor include connecting with other professionals in the field and staff at school, and resources including online, technology, websites, groups, and listservs. In the responses to this question 7 out of 8 participants responded that some type of connection was beneficial to them. One participant responded, “The wealth of school counselor resources that have come out have been great.” Another responded “Online support through Facebook educator groups. The sharing of ideas, resources, and materials worldwide has been phenomenal.”

Another theme in what the school counselors found useful to navigate the pandemic was a focus on self-care and the personal time for themselves to destress. In this theme of self-care 3 out of 8 participants responded that time for self-care by their administration and a focus on it was helpful for them. One participant responded “Knowing when to disconnect from work-related tasks and focus on my personal life priorities. It has been very helpful to have an understanding principal/superintendent who understands the need for self-care. It has been a physically and emotionally exhausting year.”

#### **4-How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted you personally?**

Participants reported that they are experiencing more impact on their personal wellness such as more stress and anxiety, less time for themselves, less patience, less time for self-care, missed connections with support groups and taking on the school's stress. All of the participants responded that it has been a challenging school year for them with tolls on their own personal wellness. Participants responded, "more stress and anxiety" and "More work hours without additional pay. Feeling less appreciated for what I do. Miss the connection with the students and my family." Participants appeared to be facing more burnout factors than normal in the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **5-How have the changing demands of your job as a school counselor impacted you personally?**

Participants responded with themes of feeling overwhelmed, stretched thin, and that their job is very demanding. They also identified being hard on themselves and feeling like they are not doing enough and are burnt out. There were also themes of more stress and anxiety and a loss of connection. All 8 participants responded that it has been a demanding year and all responses indicated a negative impact on them personally throughout the past year. Participants responded "I feel burnout. I am always excited for summer, but usually not this early..." and "More stress and anxiety, longer days" and "This is the most demanding position I've ever had."

#### **6-How have you coped with the professional and personal changes as a result of the COVID-19?**

The themes that emerged from this question included a focus on self-care, talking about feelings, exercising, reading, nature, and taking one day at a time. Participants identified different self-care activities that they engage in that are helping but also discussed the theme of

being human and letting that show. It appears that the participants in the study were able to come up with self-care items that they engage in, but it was a challenge to implement these at times. One participant responded, “Taking it one day at a time, try to plan ahead and just be ok if the plan changes.” And another participant responded “I try to do self-care as much as possible. I try to talk about these feelings and get them out and have just been rolling with the punches.”

**7-What supports, or resources are in place within the school system for you as a school counselor to navigate the changes due to the COVID-19 impact?**

The participants responded with the following themes of the employee assistance programs, technology supports such as zoom and schoology, and virtual supports. Three of the eight participants identified having access to an employee assistance program that they were aware of as a benefit. One participant responded, “Our district has an EAP (Employee Assistance Program) contract with the Village, so I am comforted knowing that’s available if I need it.” Another theme identified was that there were no supports in place for them to navigate the changes and they felt like an island. Participants identified more training is needed and that they felt like an island alone in all the changes happening throughout the year. One participant responded “I am kind of an island. I have a select few colleagues who I can speak with openly about the challenges.” And another participant commented “It has been challenging because we are oftentimes the “go to” person and we haven’t always been equipped with the necessary information or resources.

**8- What would be helpful for you as a school counselor to navigate the changing demands to due COVID-19 pandemic?**

The themes that were identified from this question included support, more training, more time, and communication. All the eight participants indicated support in their response. One

participant stated, “I think a support group would be nice, but I do feel supported by my fellow school counselor.” Another participant responded “Time to reflect with other school counselors in a safe and confidential setting. And separate from conferences and professional development settings. Just a stand-alone opportunity to get together and socialize with people who get it.” The amount of support and consistency of support from other professionals appeared to be an important indicator for success in navigating the changing demands for the school counselors.

The other theme of training and resources was consistent across participant responses. They indicated that they wanted more time and training for the transition to online. One participant responded, “More training.” And another participant responded, “more time at the front end of the pandemic so that I did not lose so much time later learning the new technologies.”

### **Discussion**

The study highlighted the need for further training and guidance in technology and virtual environments. School Counselors were expected to transition quickly to an online environment. This was one major theme across responses that participants felt they did not receive adequate training to be able to perform their school counseling duties the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic. A future consideration would be schools, administration, and school counseling organizations equipping school counseling professionals with the training and resources needed to complete their responsibilities.

Historically, school counselors have had numerous and competing demands regarding the roles and responsibilities they are expected to perform. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the role conflict that already exists for school counselors. The need to possibly be a teacher, spending more time on paperwork, trying to get ahold of students/families, and working

through the logical constraints of scheduling and attendance, all while all of this may have been done outside of work hours without additional pay. The more school counselors engage in non-school counselor related duties the lower their job satisfaction and direct service delivery to students (Moyer, 2011). Future considerations would include the school, administrators, and school counseling organizations paying close attention to the roles assigned to school counselors and being mindful of how adding additional non-counseling related activities impacts the school counselor personally and professionally as well as the number of direct services the school counselor can offer. When school counselors are experiencing emotional exhaustion there are lower amounts of direct service.

The nature of the school counselors' role can lend itself to burnout, but the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the contributing factors for burnout. The participants identified experiencing burnout, exhaustion, loss of connection with students and support groups, less time for personal wellness, and feeling depleted. School counselors report the highest levels of emotional exhaustion among mental health professionals which in turn leads to burnout (Fye et al., 2020). Future considerations include identifying ways for school counselors to maintain connection and support and a focus on burnout prevention. Staff and administration need to be made aware of the signs and symptoms of burnout and adequate time and resources need to be given to help cope and avoid feelings of burnout.

The recommendations for further research include a focus on administrative support of school counselors and their roles. Another area to consider for further research include mediating factors between role ambiguity of school counselors and burnout. Also, considering the limitations of this study and that it was an exploratory design it is recommended that more of a focus be given to the various roles of school counselors.

School counselors identified that what helped them cope with the COVID-19 pandemic was support from other professionals, groups (online/in person), sharing of ideas of resources and materials, prioritizing self-care and personal time, compassionate administration, and practicing mindfulness. Organizational and administrative support, access to supervision, and having adequate resources available help prevent feelings of burnout among school counselors. Future considerations for supporting school counselors include understanding job roles, burnout prevention, and practicing supportive administrative supervision.

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