Experiences of Urban School Counselors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

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EXPERIENCES OF URBAN SCHOOL COUNSELORS: AN INTERPRETIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Jennifer A. Meador

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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EXPERIENCES OF URBAN SCHOOL COUNSELORS: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Jennifer A. Meador, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2021

Urban School Counselors (USC) are continuously making decisions, prioritizing responsibilities, and acting in ways that best serve the needs of students, while up against complex factors and challenges (Dye, 2014). Though research has explored critical factors and provided conceptual understanding of the school counselor role, few studies have offered specific ways USCs actually implement and navigate their role in its full context (Dye, 2014; Lee, 2005; Mitcham et al., 2009). Thus, this study differed from other empirical literature in that it aimed to understand USCs holistic experiences, rather than focusing solely on one aspect of their role (e.g., leadership activities). Specifically, this study was interested in how the interaction and interplay of factors, such as school climate, USC responsibilities, environment, and relationships can influence the USC role. Therefore, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design, which utilized in-depth interviews and a focus group, was used to increase understanding into the lived experiences of USCs and how they make sense of their role within their schools.

Of the eligible participants \((n = 15)\), six school counselors volunteered and were from six different Title I schools within one urban district. Four participants worked with high school aged students, while two worked in a middle school. The sample self-identified as predominately
White, including 83% White ($n = 5$), and 16% Hispanic ($n = 1$). Additionally, 83% identified as female ($n = 5$ female, $n = 1$ male). Offering USCs an opportunity to share real experiences, stories, and perceptions was essential to this study and provided insight into the complexity and diverse influences. Findings of this phenomenological study were reviewed in relation to the research questions and five themes and six subthemes emerged from the data: (1) USC Activities: Fusion of Knowledge, Variability, and Affect: (1.1) Differentiators for How USCs Adapt, (1.2) COVID-19, (1.3) Purposefulness; (2) Building Relationships and Providing Support: (2.1) Trauma and Challenges; (3) Relationships with Administration and Staff; (4) Experiential and Educational Support; (5) Urban School Culture: (5.1) Influences, (5.2) Competency and Empathy. Greater understanding into the lived experiences and affective states of USCs, how they make decisions, prioritize responsibilities, serve students, understand their role, and manage challenges has the potential to extend general instructional efforts to include more targeted training and supervision opportunities, which could positively influence urban school communities-at-large (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). The study’s implications and imitations are explored, along with a discussion about future research.
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I dedicate this to you.

Jennifer A. Meador
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The school counseling profession has evolved over time, with each era building on the next to meet the changes and demands of education reform, contemporary society, and the needs of students and families (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a; DeKruyf et al., 2013). As society becomes more and more diverse, school counselors are called to be leaders and advocates, address inequities, promote systemic change, deliver culturally responsive services, and collaborate with caregivers, community members, and staff to attend to the personal-social, career, and academic needs of all students (ASCA, 2019a; Lee, 2005; Wingfield et al., 2010).

Although ASCA’s call extends to all school counselors, this qualitative study focused on the lived experiences of urban school counselors (USC), as location and context matter for understanding how people make sense of their roles. Though context is important to understanding the role, the role of school counselors working in urban schools has largely been overlooked (Dye, 2014; Lee, 2005; Mitcham et al., 2009) and there is limited qualitative research on their actual activities and experiences in schools (Dye, 2014). Therefore, this study wanted to understand USCs’ experiences more holistically. This chapter highlights the complex characteristics and challenges unique to the urban setting, current societal context, USC expectations, and role of school counselors in urban schools. Next, the purpose of this study is outlined along with a concise description of the problem, research questions, and ways this study addressed a gap in the empirical literature. Finally, study limitations are noted along with definition of pertinent terms.
Urban Characteristics

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2006) classifies school districts into four major categories: city (urban), suburban, town, and rural. As this study focused on USCs, participants’ worked in schools located in urbanized areas, which are areas that contain the primary population and economic center. Urban areas can range from having a small (less than 100,000) to large population (250,000 or more). Without acknowledging and examining contextual factors and forces USCs may experience, understanding becomes limited regarding the fullness of their role. Therefore, it is important to recognize typical characteristics, including both strengths and challenges, of urban settings. Though urban schools provide resources, opportunities, and care for students, they also often face unique challenges and complex issues (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Lee, 2005).

Compared to rural or suburban areas, urban settings typically include 1) densely populated areas, 2) more immigrants and people of color, 3) higher rates of crime, 4) higher rates of poverty per capita, 5) inequities in healthcare and educational systems, and 6) more cultural diversity (Lee, 2005). As schools often reflect characteristics of their environments, urban school districts often experience teacher shortages and large class sizes, chronic absenteeism and transience, homelessness, substance abuse issues, family instability, lack of resources and funding, high drop-out rates, low student achievement, and systemic issues (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Forbes, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Lee, 2005). Though there are unique challenges or stigmas associated with urban school districts, there are also opportunities for student-centered learning and partnerships with community businesses that help support students and families (e.g., after school programs, work-study, mentoring, housing, food) that rural or suburban areas might not be able to access as easily.
Therefore, to promote access and equity for students, USC\text{\textss}s must understand the culture of urban environments, both unique challenges and strengths, which may or may not differ from their own experiences, and how those forces can influence school involvement and academic achievement for students and families (Walsh et al., 2007; Wilczenski et al., 2011). If USC\text{\textss}s are unfamiliar with urban settings or have not been trained sufficiently, they may misjudge or misunderstand students’ cultural norms and how to work with historically underserved or low-income students and families (Martinez et al., 2017; Savitz-Romer, 2012). As insufficient training, biases, and lack of exposure can limit the effectiveness of USC\text{\textss}s, clear understanding of the role’s expectations and responsibilities is necessary.

**Urban School Counselor Responsibilities and Experiences**

When reviewing the literature about the expectations and responsibilities of USC\text{\textss}, common themes emerge. These themes include the need for USC\text{\textss} to 1) recognize their biases and perspectives (Cole & Grothaus, 2014; Hayden et al., 2015), 2) view students within the context of their families and communities (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Lee, 2005; Martinez et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016), 3) understand how race, culture, and discrimination can function as barriers to the learning and well-being of students (Henderson, 2001; Lee, 2005), 4) ensure all students receive college-readiness services (Savitz-Romer, 2012), 5) promote social justice advocacy and leadership skills (ASCA, 2019a), 6) respond to the diverse needs of students (Lapan et al., 2014), and 7) create supportive school cultures for all students to achieve (ASCA, 2017; Bidell, 2012; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013; Mitcham et al., 2009; Wingfield et al., 2010). Additionally, supporting students is not an individual task and individual schools often lack necessary resources to confront or manage obstacles that many urban students experience (Bryan, 2005). Therefore, school counselors are
called to partner and collaborate with stakeholders, families, and community agencies to offer increased resources for students, caregivers, and the community at-large (ASCA, 2017; Hannon, 2016; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Wingfield et al., 2010). For example, partnering with local community agencies (e.g., YMCA) could provide increased opportunities for students, such as after-school programs, psychoeducational groups, mentoring, or updated technological services.

Along with USC responsibilities, come perceptions of their experiences, which are important to understand in order to provide relevant training and support for USCs. Qualitative research reviewed for this study centered primarily around collaboration and advocacy efforts of school counselors. One study explored the narratives of elementary school counselors, which revealed that school counselors partnered and collaborated with others (community, school staff, families), while also providing mental health services in their schools, support groups (e.g., anger management, bullying, social skills, and friendship), and after-school programs for students (Walsh et al., 2007). Additionally, Griffen (2019) and Bryan and Griffin (2010) revealed that school counselors partnered with families to build relationships, provide workshops, and support families to achieve access to necessary services. School counselors also collaborated with community organizations to recruit volunteers, mentors, tutors, and supportive programming for student and families.

Furthermore, studies have revealed that school counselors serve as educators. Suero-Duran (2010) interviewed 10 school counselors who worked in New York City public schools and revealed that they viewed their role as including not only traditional school counselor responsibilities, but also educator and leadership responsibilities. Both Crawford and Valle (2016) and Gonzalez’s (2017) studies revealed the necessity for school counselors to educate colleagues and the school community about unfair perceptions of students, provide resources and
trainings, promote inclusive curriculums, and increase awareness about issues (e.g., discrimination, immigration). Finally, although USC's serve as educational leaders, who advocate for equity and access for all students, they have also been trained to identify and address students’ mental and emotional health concerns (DeKruyf et al., 2013). Similarly, Willczenski and colleagues (2011) stated that USC's are educators, advocates, and mental health professionals. Mental health services for students could include referring students to outside agencies that better support students’ needs, provide goal-setting activities, and deliver psychoeducational groups (DeKruyf et al., 2013).

Though past studies have explored USC's experiences, especially regarding collaboration and advocacy efforts, studies that have examined how USC's actually experience and navigate the totality of their role while faced with various challenges are absent from the empirical literature. For example, USC's are called to be leaders; yet, research is scarce on how school counselors actually serve as leaders in their buildings (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Gonzalez, 2017; Kneale et al., 2018), while also considering how their leadership activities are situated within other contextual forces (e.g., societal context, counselor-principal relationship, caseload size, crisis situations, school climate).

**Current Societal Context**

Along with USC responsibilities and expectations, it is necessary to understand the current societal context USC's work in; specifically, the state of education, attention on children’s mental health, racism in the United States, and global Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic will be discussed. Though these contexts will be explored separately, they are very much related and influence one another. For example, historically marginalized students often experience racism, attend schools with large classes sizes with unqualified teachers, lack access to services, and
disproportionally experience consequences of a crisis (COVID-19 pandemic) more harshly than their affluent peers (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Fortuna et al., 2020; Oppel Jr. et al., 2020). Thus, students and families typically do not experience the following contextual influences separately.

To understand the state of education and aim for a homogenous sample of participants, as school districts differ, USCs interviewed for this study worked in one large public-school district in western Michigan, as school districts differ in terms of leadership, funding, location, challenges, and so on. There are approximately 201,000 people within the city limits and over 1,000,000 people surrounding the metro area. Data shows the majority of the population identify as White, with 19 percent African American and 16 percent as Hispanic/Latino. Data also shows approximately 20 percent of people in the city live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The district in which participants work educates approximately 14,000 students. Of those students, the majority identify as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 5,500$) and African American ($n = 4,500$). Additionally, approximately 12,000 students identify as economically disadvantaged (Michigan’s Official Education Source of Data, 2020). Public investment in K-12 schools has declined in Michigan over the last 10 years, which has prevented educational reform initiatives, such as retaining quality teachers, limiting the number of students per class, expanding opportunities (e.g., extracurriculars), and providing early education options for all children (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017). Specifically, on average, highest poverty school districts receive $1,200 less per child than lowest poverty districts, and districts who educate students of color receive $2,000 less than districts who serve predominately White students (Education Trust, 2015). Thus, too often, low-income students and students of color end up in a system with the lowest funding and fewest resources, which hinders opportunities and attention urban students and families receive. When schools are not properly staffed to support the needs of students, school
counselors may be pulled from appropriately supporting students to being assigned non-counseling duties (e.g., testing, scheduling, clerical).

Though limited funding often plagues urban districts, low-income students typically access certain services only at school, such as mental health services, which highlights how necessary the USC role becomes for historically marginalized students. Mental health has received increased attention over the last decade and underserved populations are more susceptible to mental health issues. Studies show that approximately 22% of children living below 100% of the federal poverty level have a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). Furthermore, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people between 10 and 34 years old and has increased over the years. In 2018, 6,211 people between the ages of 15-24 completed suicide, which draws attention to the need for quality support and counseling services for high school-aged students and young adults (CDC, 2018). However, mental health support is needed long before high school as 1 in 6 children between the ages of 2 and 8 (17.4%) have a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, and behavior disorders are among the most common disorders children experience. For example, approximately 7% of children between the ages of 3-17 (4.4. million) were diagnosed with anxiety, and anxiety and depression have increased over time. This number is likely greater, as cases of anxiety can go undiagnosed, especially when considering access to resources and treatment for historically marginalized youth. As poverty and systemic inequality influences access to resources and support for students and families, it is important to understand how oppression and racism influences people’s mental health (Carter, 2007; Carter et al., 2017; Trent et al., 2019; Williams, 2018).
Police brutality, the academic achievement gap between White students and students of color, and xenophobic politics influence the experience of many in today’s society. Most recently, police officers murdering Black men and women have sparked national protests and further ignited a call for police reform, justice, and closer look at racial inequities in the United States. Though racism and oppression permeate everyday experiences for today’s historically marginalized students and families, racism is not new. In the United States, racist and oppressive procedures and practices are deeply rooted within society, education, employment, politics, policies, healthcare, ideas, histories, and justice system (Kendi, 2019; Mitchell, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020). Isabel Wilkerson (2020), a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, describes America’s “unspoken, race-based caste system” (p. 16) as rigid, artificially constructed, a way to rank and understand a person’s status, level of respect, and access to resources and services. This infrastructure highlights who has power and who does not, stigmatizing those who are perceived as inferior (Gross, 2020). Therefore, as racist and oppressive practices and policies are not only happening today, but are entrenched in historically marginalized peoples’ everyday experiences, it is not enough for USCs to simply recognize forces of oppression. Instead, USCs must work diligently to affect change within their schools, communities, and educational system at-large. Additionally, as this current study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider how USCs not only work in deprived educational systems and fight for anti-racist practices and policies, but also how to support their historically marginalized students and families during a crisis.

In the spring of 2020, all schools in Michigan transitioned from in-person to virtual learning due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic (CDC, 2020b). COVID-19 is a virus that has not been seen in humans before this time, and is thought to spread from person to
person, such as when someone coughs or talks. As of November 10, 2020, there have been approximately 10 million cases and 37,731 deaths globally. In Michigan, there have been approximately 238,308 total cases, 80 deaths, and 33,982 cases in just the last 7 days (CDC 2020b). As imagined, this pandemic has increased inequity and limited access for underserved youth and families. People who are Black and Latino are more likely to contract and die from COVID-19 (Oppel Jr. et al., 2020), and carry the economic consequences of the pandemic (Kochhar, 2020). Consequences could include a loss of income, employment, and food security, which all can adversely influence the social-emotional, cognitive, and academic wellness of those affected (Mitchell, 2020), which may not be easy to overcome for families and children and may affect future generations.

Additionally, to contain the spread and encourage social distancing, schools stopped meeting in-person. Many elementary and secondary schools began the 2020-2021 school year virtually or operating within a hybrid model that allowed social distancing and ample time to disinfect common spaces. Though perhaps a shutdown was necessary to contain the virus, it also takes away students’ access to services, such as mental health, food, wellness, and so on (Hannon, 2016). Therefore, to support the needs of underserved and historically marginalized students who no longer attend school in person, USCs have to adjust and adapt their role. Various considerations during this transition might include students access to technology and resources to complete schoolwork from home, supporting students who have an individualized education plan and other academic needs, ensuring students have access to food and resources are provided to support mental health and social-emotional-social. Furthermore, while USCs are supporting students, they also likely have personal or familial responsibilities of their own. Therefore, understanding USCs experiences and how they support urban students during a time
of crisis likely is more complicated than someone might outwardly assume. Now that a few societal factors have been explored, the USC role can be more fully understood.

**Urban School Counselor Challenges**

Along with navigating the current societal landscape, characteristics of urban settings, responsibilities and expectations, and implementing a school counseling program outlined by the ASCA National Model (2003, 2019a), research shows counselor-to-student ratios (ASCA, 2016) and working relationships with principals (Clemens et al., 2009) influence school counselors’ abilities to support the diverse needs of students. Unfortunately, large caseloads occur throughout the United States, with an average ratio of 1 counselor per 482 students (ASCA, 2016), which is almost double what the American School Counseling Association recommends. In states that have some of the largest cities, ratios average 1:444 in Texas, 1:708 in California, and 1:678 in Illinois (ASCA, 2016). A qualitative study identifying perspectives of urban students, revealed that their school counselors were rarely available, which caused needs of students to go unmet. That particular school had a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:450 (Owens et al., 2011). Furthermore, in Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell’s (2005) study, the average caseload of 102 USCs was 362 students. As imagined, large caseloads can detract USCs support for students and overwhelm them.

Like large caseloads, working relationship between the school counselor and principal affects a school counselor’s ability to implement school programs. Studies show that when school counselors perceive they have a strong relationship with their principals their programs align more closely with what they believe to be important. Therefore, the stronger the partnership, the more likely school counselors can determine what they do with their time and how they exercise advocacy skills (Clemens et al., 2009; Fye et al., 2018). As it is likely that
school counselors will be supervised by principals (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2012), who are the leaders in the schools, a strong working relationship between counselor and principal is important. If the relationship is lacking, school counselors may feel confused about their role and be assigned non-counseling duties, especially if their principal does not acknowledge them as leaders or systemic change agents (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). These non-counseling duties diminish the influence USCs can have within their school and further creates a complex landscape for the USC to navigate.

As research has shown, aspects of the USC role has been explored, including challenges, critical factors, and responsibilities of USCs. This knowledge is helpful when conceptualizing the role and deciding where training for future school counselors may be prudent. That said, school counselors often juggle a myriad of responsibilities and issues simultaneously, which make descriptive studies that uncover how USCs experience, navigate, and perform their roles and responsibilities, amidst a complex environment, necessary (Holcomb & Mitchell, 2005).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of how USCs’ experience and make sense of their role. Greater understanding into the lived experiences of USCs, how they make decisions, prioritize responsibilities, serve students, understand their role, and manage challenges can create relevant training and supervision opportunities (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Although training is vital to school counselors’ development, not all training programs prepare school counselors adequately to work with the challenges and complexities within urban education (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008; Lee, 2005). For example, graduate programs have included curricula to address multicultural issues, advocacy, and leadership (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015); however,
increasing training efforts without understanding school counselors’ holistic experiences or challenges (e.g., managing crisis, confronting inequities in education, handling unmanageable caseloads, forming relationships and partnerships) may not support their needs. In utilizing a phenomenological approach for this study, USCs were encouraged to share their stories, increasing awareness of their experiences as they navigate their role, while also considering the holistic and complex nature of being fully human and having to prioritize and make decisions.

**Problem Statement**

Even though critical factors have been identified as a way for school counselors to support urban students (ASCA, 2019b), the school counselor role in urban settings is complex and has been given little attention (Dye, 2014; Lee, 2005; Mitcham et al., 2009). Primarily, the focus has been on understanding the role conceptually and how it aligns with the ASCA National Model, offering few studies that provide specific ways USCs actually implement and navigate their role, while also considering various complexities they experience and support they need. For example, although leadership and advocacy are essential responsibilities of USCs (ASCA, 2017), research is lacking on how school counselors actually assume leadership and advocacy roles in their buildings (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Kneale et al., 2018), especially while performing other duties.

**Research Questions**

To increase understanding of how USCs’ experience and make sense of their complex role, an interpretive phenomenological design was utilized. To increase specificity, this study sought school counselors who had experience working in an urban district. This study was guided by the following two questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of urban school counselors?
2. What does it mean to be an urban school counselor?

**Significance of Study**

ASCA (2017) states that school counselors encourage a constructive and supportive learning environment for all students by advocating, leading, and collaborating with others. This study adds to the literature by uncovering tangible ways USCs perform and implement these duties, going beyond a conceptual understanding of the urban counselor role. Greater understanding into the lived experiences of USCs is important to create relevant support for the role (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). For example, when asked about post-training needs to more effectively serve youth and families, USCs identified family and parenting issues, academic achievement and counseling students who consistently fail classes, issues of poverty (Henderson, 2001; Holcomb-MeCoy & Mitchell, 2005), prevention programming for drop-out rates and violence, and conducting needs assessments (Owens et al., 2009). Similarly, this study provides practical implications for graduate programs who prepare school counselors to competently work in diverse school environments (Holcomb & Mitchell, 2005; Paisley et al., 2006; Studer, 2005).

**Definition of Terms**

Significant terms used throughout this dissertation are defined below.

**ASCA**: The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) was founded in 1952 to promote professional practice. ASCA supports school counselors as they work to help students’ academic, career, and social/emotional development. ASCA provides professional development opportunities and other resources to support school counselors’ efforts (ASCA, 2020).

**ASCA National Model**: The ASCA National Model guides school counselors as they create comprehensive school counseling programs. To improve all student outcomes, counseling programs must be 1) data-Informed, 2) developmentally appropriate and delivered systematically to all students, 3) purposeful in providing postsecondary readiness opportunities, 4) designed to
close achievement and opportunity gaps, and 5) created to improve student achievement, attendance and discipline (ASCA, 2019a, 2020).

**Urban:** The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2006) classifies school districts into four major categories: city (urban), suburban, town, and rural. Urban schools include schools that are located in urbanized areas and that contain the primary population and economic center of the area. Urban areas can range from a small (less than 100,000) to large population (250,000 or more).

**School Counselor:** School counselors are important contributors to a school’s team. They help all students in the areas of academic, career, and social/emotional development and achievement (ASCA, 2019b).

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):** IPA is qualitative research approach that is phenomenological and committed to examining how people make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2012).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The goal of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of USCs. To provide context, this chapter will begin with a brief overview of the evolution of the school counseling profession in the United States, which dates back to the early 1900’s. Then, the ASCA National Model (2003, 2019a) will be discussed to further understand present-day expectations of the school counselor role. Furthermore, as literature suggests the USC role differs from rural and suburban roles, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSC), Advocacy Competencies, and preparation of school counselors will be explored. Finally, research about the experiences of USCs will be reviewed as they align with the current study. Although many of the reviewed studies used qualitative methods, the current study differed in that it aimed to consider the whole experience of USCs (e.g., responsibilities, school climate, administration support, training, caseload) without focusing solely on one aspect of their role (e.g., leadership, advocacy). This study followed the belief that USCs are continuously making decisions, prioritizing responsibilities, and acting in ways to best serve the needs of students, while up against complex factors and challenges (Dye, 2014). Considering how different variables might interact and influence the USC role is key to providing greater appreciation and relevant support for students and families. Unfortunately, this broader understanding of the USC role has largely been missing from the literature.

History of the School Counseling Profession

To meet the needs of students, families, communities, and society at-large, the school counseling profession has evolved over time (DeKruyf et al., 2013). The school counseling role is not static and was designed to support ever-changing needs. During the early 1900’s until
1940, the role of the school counselor in the United States began in response to the demands of the Industrial Revolution. This era advocated against child labor conditions and assisted students in finding employment that matched their interests and skills. Teachers and administrators acted in this role to help prepare students for the world of work. One early known contributor during this time in the profession’s development included Lysander Richards in 1881, who encouraged the idea of trained professionals helping students connect work with their purpose in life. Additionally, Frank Parsons in 1909, who coined the term ‘vocational guidance’, used assessments to assist students in work placement, while Jessie Davis in 1914, a high school principal, defined a vocational guidance curriculum (Gysbers, 2004; Wingfield et al., 2010).

To expand career support, a mental health focus began in the 1950’s and 1960’s in response to meeting students’ personal and social needs. Furthermore, with the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik in 1957 and the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, school counselors were pushed to create programs that increased academic achievement for all students (specifically in mathematics and science). To increase services for all students, and with a developmental focus, the school counselor role expanded from working only in high schools to middle and elementary schools in the 1960’s to 1980’s (Wingfield et al., 2010). Programs began to emerge, such as The Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 to support diverse needs of students, and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to hold staff accountable for reducing the achievement gap between low-income and students of color and their more advantaged peers (Wingfield et al., 2010). Consequently, the 1990’s and beginning of the 20th century prompted school counseling programs to offer more comprehensive, developmental and collaborative services to meet the needs of all students, not just privileged students (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Though the school counseling profession has evolved to meet vocational, emotional, and
academic needs, a standard way of practice was lacking. In response, ASCA, which was founded in 1952 to promote professional practice, created the ASCA National Model (2003), in order to provide a standard practice for school counselors to follow.

**ASCA National Model**

The ASCA National Model, crafted at the beginning of the twentieth century, called for school counselors to offer culturally responsive services to meet students’ personal, social, career, and academic needs. Four themes of the ASCA National Model include advocacy, collaboration, systemic change, and leadership. Furthermore, it was intended to provide uniform understanding of the profession to reduce issues like role confusion and ambiguity, which have been themes woven throughout the school counseling literature for many years (Chandler et al., 2018; DeKruyf et al., 2013). Ambiguity around the school counselor role, which still exists today, typically results from this lack of standard practice until the twentieth century and role expectations from multiple stakeholders (e.g., principal, supervisor, profession). When there is not uniform understanding about what school counselors do, they are often assigned non-counseling duties based on established traditions, like scheduling, discipline, and clerical work that interfere with their abilities to create and execute a comprehensive school counseling program (Chandler et al., 2018; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Studer, 2005). However, according to ASCA (2019a), school counselors are expected to create and employ a comprehensive program that is data-driven and focuses on 1) student outcomes (how do all students benefit from the program?), 2) student competencies, and 3) professional competencies (counselor’s skills). Ultimately, comprehensive school counseling programs accentuate purposeful activities that reach all students and reduce non-counseling activities.
To measure school counselors’ activities, as they related to the ASCA National Model, Dye (2014) administered the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (Scarborough, 2005) to 102 USCs across Michigan, who worked in schools where the majority of students (at least 60 percent) were African American. Results showed that the most frequently performed activities included 1) counseling students about behavior issues, 2) consulting with staff regarding student behaviors, 3) counseling students about personal and family concerns, 4) scheduling classes, and 5) counseling students about academic issues. Considerations for why counseling students about their behaviors was the most performed activity, even though it does not align with the ASCA National Model, may be due to principal and staff perspectives of African American students or the school’s belief that school counselors perform services like dealing with behavioral issues (Dye, 2014). Likewise, Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell (2005) surveyed more than 100 USCs working in East Coast schools (e.g., New York City, Philadelphia, Washington D.C.) to determine how they viewed their experiences and roles within their schools. The average caseload per counselor was 363 students, and study results indicated USCs predominately 1) counsel groups and individuals, 2) consult with teachers and parents, 3) coordinate services and activities, 4) administer tests, 5) advise others, 6) handle administrative or clerical duties, and 7) schedule classes. Overall, results showed school counselors followed a comprehensive model; however, similar to Dye’s study, they were still performing tasks at a frequency not aligned with the ASCA National Model.

Although the ASCA National Model provides a conceptual framework for all school counselors, scholars suggest there are differences between urban and rural or suburban school counselor roles that need to be addressed purposefully (Hannon, 2016; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Lee, 2005; Owens, et al., 2009; Wilczenski, et al., 2011). Thus, for school counselors to
effectively work in urban schools, research suggests they must understand urban culture, social and ecological factors, how life experiences can influence school involvement and achievement, and how to support students navigate challenges associated with their environments (Forbes, 2004; Green et al., 2005; Walsh et al., 2007; Wilczenski et al., 2011). For example, Holcomb and Mitchell’s (2005) study showed that academic achievement, poverty, low family functioning, substance abuse, violence in the community, and truancy to be among the most prevalent issues or concerns of urban students. Therefore, to extend ASCA’s call to support the needs of USCs, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSC) (Education Trust, 2009), Advocacy Competencies (ACA, 2003, 2018) and Advocacy Competencies for School Counselors (Trusty & Brown, 2005) were designed to provide specific leadership and guidance.

**Transforming School Counseling and Advocacy Competencies**

TSC was created from the Education Trust, a national nonprofit that seeks to reduce the achievement gap between low-income and students of color and their more privileged peers (Education Trust, 2009). TSC and Education Trust believe that urban students can succeed academically despite various challenges they may experience (e.g., poverty, neighborhood violence), and that USCs who have relevant training are in a unique position to assess and address barriers to student learning (Education Trust, 2009; Martin, 2002). When training does not support school counselors’ development in recognizing and implementing certain roles or characteristics, like leadership (Kneale et al., 2018), they may not be looked to as leaders in their buildings and be assigned non-counseling duties (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Wingfield et al., 2010). USCs are uniquely called to be leaders and advocates in order to address inequities, promote systemic change, and collaborate with parents, community members, and staff to ensure all students can succeed academically (ASCA, 2019b; Lee, 2005; Wingfield et al., 2010).
Furthermore, to support the diversity of students’ needs, ASCA (2019a) recommends school counselors spend at least 80 percent of their time delivering services to students, both directly (e.g., responsive services to address immediate issues) and indirectly (e.g., referrals, consultation with teachers). Therefore, to support preparation efforts of USCs, TSC asks graduate programs questions like how are counselors prepared to collaborate with others to increase student achievement and confront policies that foster academic inequity?

Like TSC, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies were created in 2003 for counselors who work with and on behalf of clients and students experiencing systemic challenges (ACA, 2003, 2018). Six domains included in these competencies are 1) empowerment, 2) client advocacy, 3) community collaboration, 4) systems advocacy, 5) collective action and 6) social/political advocacy. These domains highlight specific ways school counselors can advocate for or on behalf of students and families in urban schools. For example, school counselors might advocate by identifying students’ strengths, recognizing oppressive systems and processes, providing critical resources, and educating students about self-advocacy strategies.

Furthermore, advocacy competencies specific to professional school counselors (Trusty & Brown, 2005) include a counselor’s disposition, knowledge, and skills. Disposition comprises of a counselors’ perspectives and values, and how they recognize and implement advocacy within their role. For example, what biases do they have, do they feel they can take risks to help support students, and how do they invite the whole family to participate in the student’s educational journey? As far as knowledge goes, school counselors should know what resources are available in the community, how to use problem solving skills to navigate difficult situations, and how to partner with others to encourage change. Additionally, school counselors must listen and show
empathy, be able to communicate effectively to build collaboration and foster strong relationships, and develop strategies for reducing personal burnout (Trusty & Brown, 2005). Finally, to navigate a complicated system that is often resistant, school counselors 1) perform group interventions (students, parents, staff) due to large caseloads, 2) provide students and parents strategies and resources that support equitable treatment, 3) partner with administrators with similar social justice goals, and 5) seek additional training in leadership and advocacy. Thus, along with considering principles and competencies of the profession, the following section will briefly explore training considerations for USCs in order to understand how they are prepared to serve as effective leaders, advocates, and partners.

**Urban School Counselor Preparation**

Scholars advocate that to support school counselors as they navigate the unique and diverse needs of students and work to reduce inequities in education, counselor education programs have the responsibility to provide relevant training (Martinez et al., 2017; Paisley et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2016). Relevant training opportunities shown to increase school counselors’ self-efficacy or confidence include discussions on multicultural issues, which should include issues of racism, educational inequities, wage-gaps, threat of deportation, incarceration rates, and so on. For example, given that more than five million children (7 percent) in the United States have had a parent who has been incarcerated at some point, with larger percentages for African American and children from low-income households (Murphey & Cooper, 2015), it is likely USCs will encounter parent incarceration. Thus, depending on how school counselors perceive and respond to certain situations, parent incarceration for example, students may feel either supported and connected or shamed and doubt their ability to succeed (Hannon, 2016; Henderson, 2001; Lapan
et al., 2014). Therefore, it is not enough for USCs to discuss issues with students. They must also have a clear understanding how experiences and issues of oppression affect those they serve.

Additionally, USCs, especially in high-poverty areas, take on added leadership roles to bridge cultural gaps between teachers and students (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007), in order to create a climate where all students feel safe and can succeed (Bidell, 2012; Lloyd-Hazlet & Foster, 2013). Thus, USCs must understand how laws, policies, and stereotypes might influence the experiences of students (Martinez, Dye, & Gonzalez, 2017). Therefore, training must include opportunities for immersion and skill development, along with in-depth conversations about urban challenges and ways of social justice advocacy (Constantine, 2002; Cook et al., 2015; Hannon, 2016; Hayden et al., 2015; Wingfield et al., 2010).

Training must go beyond traditional or client-specific interventions to incorporate opportunities for USCs to exercise advocacy and leadership (Gibson et al., 2012; Wingfield et al., 2010). For example, learning effective ways to confront teachers’ attitudes or policies that do not benefit all students (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Studer, 2005) or helping teachers create culturally appropriate curriculum that allows real-world discussions that are associated with students’ experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Specifically, literature suggests that understanding and recognizing injustices students and families experience provide school counselors opportunities to 1) serve as leaders and advocates within their school environments and communities, 2) create supportive school cultures, 3) construct initiatives that fight persecutory attitudes and behaviors, and 4) help students develop self-advocacy skills (ASCA, 2017, 2019b; Education Trust, 2009; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013; Mitcham et al., 2009). Thus, school counselors must understand 1) how their beliefs affect their work with students and the
community, 2) their students’ worldview, and 3) how to provide interventions and strategies that align with students’ cultural views (Arredondo et al., 1996).

Although training is vital to school counselors’ development, not all training programs prepare school counselors adequately to work with the challenges and complexities in urban education (Holcomb-Mccoy & Johnston, 2008; Lee, 2005). Though CACREP (2016) graduate programs mandate that training allow opportunities for counselor trainees to exhibit skills, such as leadership, some receive little training and do not know how to exercise leadership skills in relation to their counseling programs. For this reason, USCs may not be looked to as leaders in their school communities (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Additionally, if USCs are trained or supervised by someone who operates under an outdated or traditional model, their potential to partner with the entire school community to provide support to students and families diminishes (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Studer, 2005) and they many feel confused about their role, overwhelmed, or inadvertently contribute to the status quo (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

Furthermore, due to the unique challenges USCs face, they are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and burnout (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Lee, 2005). Researchers suggest that school counselors who experience greater perceived stress, such as increased work demands (e.g., testing coordinator, clerical work), report lower job satisfaction (McCarthy et al., 2010; Mullen et al., 2018). Furthermore, Mullen and colleagues’ (2018) study showed that younger school counselors who are less experienced are more apt to report greater perceived stress compared to school counselors who are older and more experienced. Thus, in high-poverty urban districts (Garcia & Weiss, 2019), it may be sensible to assume that school counselors may leave for districts that offer increased pay, job stability and satisfaction, support, and reduced stress.
To demonstrate the importance and inconsistencies between training and real-world work experiences, Holcomb-McCoy and Johnston (2008) recruited nine White counseling students from CACREP programs. These students completed their practicum experience in urban schools, with predominantly African American and Latinx students, and were asked to provide written narratives of their experiences. Six themes emerged from this study. First, relationships with students, teachers, and principals were strong influences to participants’ experiences. Second, participants recognized cultural differences, and some felt uncomfortable being one of few White people in the school. Third, participants learned how academic achievement can be influenced by external factors and experiences within urban environments (e.g., poverty). Fourth, participants recognized the need to further build counseling skills in order to better support students, with one participant saying, “I need to work on behavior management techniques…it was difficult to deal with children’s teasing, fighting, outbursts, and crying” (p. 13). Finally, participants recognized they had limited resources, yet many responsibilities. For example, one participant said she also served as a nurse two days a week (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). This study is important and highlights areas where potential gaps between training and real-work experiences exist.

Another qualitative study that explored USC training, specifically school counselors providing college readiness services to urban students, conducted two rounds of interviews with 11 predominately White school counselors. These counselors worked in high-poverty urban schools, and reportedly felt unprepared to work with low-income, first-generation students and families due to their background and training (Savitz-Romer, 2012). Specifically, participants explained that students’ lack of expectations and understanding of the college process, apathy, and the many personal issues students experienced as challenges to post-secondary planning. When USCs are inadequately trained or unfamiliar with urban settings, the likelihood of them
misjudging or misunderstanding students’ cultural norms, attitudes, and issues increases (Holcomb & Johnston, 2008; Martinez et al., 2017). To demonstrate, Cole and Grothaus (2014) conducted a study that identified school counselors’ views of low-income families they served. Perspectives included families 1) lacked parenting skills to adequately support their children, 2) students were around negative environmental conditions, and 3) students lacked motivation. As imagined, the belief that low-income students and families do not value education could inappropriately influence USCs’ perceptions of students’ motivation, ability, and potential.

Thus far, the history of the school counseling profession, the ASCA National Model, and methods to increase USCs competence have been examined. Though these guides are helpful and necessary, the school counseling role is complex. While USCs work to reduce the achievement gap between low-income and students of color and their more privileged peers (Education Trust, 2009), they often work alongside chronic and complex issues and challenges like absenteeism, homelessness, family instability, lack of resources, and deeply-rooted systemic problems (Lee, 2005). Additionally, large counselor caseloads, testing demands and accountability, and non-counseling duties complicate a school counselor’s ability to support students’ needs. The following section will examine research that has uncovered actual experiences of USCs.

Experiences of Urban School Counselors

To understand school counselors’ experiences, it is important to first understand student connectedness, as part of the USC role includes helping students feel connected and valued in their schools. Lapan and colleagues (2014) surveyed 5,595 urban students and found school connectedness, which is defined as a student’s belief that adults and other students care about them, helped students feel included and accepted. Student connectedness also increased when school counselors were responsive to their needs, built personal relationships with them, and
provided services that were personalized and developmentally relevant. Furthermore, Konold and colleagues (2017) surveyed 52,012 students across 323 schools, which showed that increased student engagement and reduced peer aggression (e.g., bullying) were associated with supportive relationships between staff and students. Though connectedness is important, there is limited research how USCs develop relationships with students (Crawford & Valle, 2016; Dye, 2014; Gonzalez, 2017; Kneale et al., 2018).

Moreover, to understand challenges and ways school counselors worked with undocumented families in Texas, Crawford and Valle (2016) conducted an embedded case study. The most common challenge in this study included students’ basic needs not being met. Therefore, school counselors partnered with community members to provide clothes, school supplies, and hygienic items for students. Additionally, school counselors created student networks that offered support to other students. Furthermore, school counselors reported having to educate colleagues about unfair perceptions of students. For example, certain students who asked for additional food during lunchtime were viewed as greedy instead of hungry by some staff. Another challenge included students commuting over the border to attend school in the United States. Many students felt afraid about their immigration status and could not participate in school activities because they needed to get home before dark. In understanding students’ realities, one counselor stated,

The tests are supposed to start at a certain time, alright. Let's be honest. It’s the summer. We're waiting for the kids to get to school. They will tell us flat out, ‘I didn't get to the bus. I missed it. I have to cross. It's taking me this long.’ Okay. So what do I do? Do I tell the student, ‘Well now you can't test?’ Can't do that. That's not fair either. So you have to
try and find your way where you're fulfilling the requirements but being flexible enough
to look at all those different things (p. 11).

Though this study provides insight into USC activities, it does not address how school
counselors developed partnerships to support students’ needs and encourage persistence. For
example, what were administrators’ perspectives of undocumented students and how did that
influence the work of school counselors (Crawford & Valle, 2016). Would the experience of
USCs differ if they felt different levels of support from administration?

Similarly, to understand experienced USCs’ perspectives of leadership, Suero-Duran
(2010) interviewed 10 school counselors who worked in New York City public schools. Results
revealed that school counselors viewed their role as containing not only traditional school
counselor responsibilities, but they also served as educators and leaders. Furthermore, they stated
that leadership is always changing and influenced by forces in and out of the school. For
example, a participant of this study stated:

I see, as an experienced counselor, when walking into a school, I have to learn the
systems and functions that this school already has set up for me. And whether or not I
agree or disagree with it, I still have to learn them and see how I can fit into that mold.
And after making my own assessment, then I can go forth on a plan that can make me
become an asset to that school and can make the Principal or the leaders of the building
utilize me in a positive way and bring me into their fold so that I can make a difference
for the school at large and definitely makes an impact for students (p. 126).

This aligns with previous literature that although leadership and advocacy are essential to the
school counselor role, these practices take time, commitment, awareness, and support
(Dollarhide et al., 2008).
To understand the lived experiences of school counselors who advocated on behalf of LGBT students, Gonzalez (2017) interviewed school counselors in the southeast part of the country. Results revealed that they 1) supported students and encouraged them to develop self-advocacy strategies, 2) led groups, like Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), 3) provided resources and trainings to the whole school community, 4) promoted an inclusive curriculum, and 5) collaborated with community members to increase awareness of LGBT issues (Gonzalez, 2017). Furthermore, Griffen (2019) followed the efforts of two USCs in a North Carolina high school to explore how school counselors collaborated with families to discuss low academic achievement and secondary attainment. These counselors believed families wanted to be included in their child’s academics, so they invited them to participate. They led five coffee hours for families, which was a simple act, but grabbed the attention and approval of stakeholders and the principal and encouraged staff to become involved, which began to slowly transform the school culture. Families were able to express their need for further understanding and access regarding college and career resources. A parent survey indicated that a big challenge to being involved in their schools included them not understanding the dynamics and ways of the school. They also said that coffee hour was a way they could get involved and feel connected (Griffen, 2019). This study demonstrates how knowledge, creativity, and parent involvement can support students. However, how did time, resources, and support influence the counselor’s ability to perform this initiative? Again, understanding the USC role more holistically is important, as research has shown that barriers to the counselor role includes school climate (whether the climate was collaborative or not), expectations of administration, perspectives and self-efficacy of school counselors about their role and ability to partner with others, and issues of time and training (Bryan & Griffin, 2010).
Finally, to understand successful and unsuccessful leadership experiences of new counselors, Dollarhide and colleagues (2008) conducted a year-long longitudinal study. Themes from this study included a counselor’s leadership attitudes, goals, external conditions, reactions to resistance, and challenges. School counselors who rated their leadership as successful 1) believed they were responsible for change, 2) did not succumb to self-doubts or doubts from others, 3) had goals at the school-level that were focused, 4) perceived supported by administration and staff, 5) had a role they defined themselves, and 6) felt confident. On the other hand, those who rated their leadership as unsuccessful 1) felt they lacked control over their ability to affect change, 2) had district-level goals that were global instead of specific, 3) lacked support from administrators and colleagues, 4) performed a role defined by others, 5) felt fear and confusion, and 5) struggled to see how to engage in leadership (Dollarhide et al., 2008).

Additionally, Fitch and Marshall (2004) utilized survey methods to understand how school counselors at high-achieving schools spend their time. Results showed these school counselors spend more time on tasks like program management, evaluation, and research. Specifically, school counselors conducted needs assessments to understand their program’s effectiveness, and then adjusted their programs based on what they found, which aligns with the ASCA National Model (ASCA 2019a) about using data to inform comprehensive school counseling programs. This understanding is imperative for counselor educators as they train school counselors to become effective and efficient leaders in their schools.

Understanding school counselors’ experiences is pivotal to providing appropriate support. These studies provide a glance into USC activities and functions within their buildings and, though useful, this study differs in that it hoped to expand understanding into how USCs experience their role as a whole, while engaging in these activities. Forbes (2010) states that due
to large caseloads and complex issues, USCs must be able to think, feel, and act on many things simultaneously while remaining calm and centered. Although past studies have explored the unique needs and characteristics of urban schools and what USCs could do to help support students, nearly no studies have examined how USCs actually experience and navigate the wholeness of their role. Therefore, this study expands understanding of the USC role, from school counselors’ perspectives, to ensure training and preparation practices align with the real-work experiences of USCs. For example, school counselors may know how to advocate on behalf of underserved students when the school climate fosters that type of work; however, what if the climate does not foster that type of work? Are USCs able to attain support from principals and staff who do not understand their role or see them as leaders? Ultimately, USCs play a critical role in students’ educational journey, which make understanding of their role, proper support, and training necessary.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This section of the paper will begin with a brief description of a pilot study I conducted, as that study informed the methodology of the current study. Subsequently, the research questions and research design of the current study will be discussed.

Pilot Study

The pilot study also looked at the experiences of USCs; however, followed a more hermeneutic phenomenological perspective than the current study. This study elaborated on concepts already seen in the literature, such as complexity, supportive relationships, and training efforts. USCs feelings and thoughts associated with their role were uncovered, going beyond simply identifying what it is USCs might do throughout a given day. Themes of this study centered around the counselor role, support for the role, and feelings about the role. Below is a table the provides a quick overview of themes found within this study.

Table 1

Themes from Data Analysis of Pilot Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselor Role</td>
<td>Active Gap Filler Connector</td>
<td>Participant 1: “As a counselor there is no routine. Every day is different and you’re a jack of all trades, essentially.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for USCs</td>
<td>Experiential opportunities and Relationships</td>
<td>Participant 3: “I do get a strong sense of community…you just feel like what we're all doing this together.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USC feelings about their role</td>
<td>Stressed, excited, overwhelmed, limited, punished, settled, ‘success’ stories</td>
<td>Participant 2: “I think there’s excitement for me, because the energy you know…I have fun with the kids…especially the sixth graders who are very impressionable.”</td>
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</table>
Counselor Role: Active Gap Filler and Connector

As previously mentioned, ASCA calls school counselors to be leaders and advocates, address inequities, promote systemic change, deliver culturally responsive services, and collaborate with caregivers, community members, and staff to attend to the personal-social, career, and academic needs of all students (ASCA, 2003, 2019a). These sentiments were echoed by participants, along with acknowledging how ASCA’s guidelines are an ‘ideal’ guiding force to their work; but do not always align with their ‘realistic’ role. Furthermore, along with identifying ASCA standards as important to their role, participants described their role as active, using words like “ever-changing” and “chaotic,” which also aligns with experiences found within the literature (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Forbes, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Lee, 2005). Participant 1 stated, “as a counselor, there is no routine. Every day is different and you’re the jack of all trades, essentially.” Participant 2 said he attends to “whatever is most urgent, like emerging issues and crises” but also acknowledged that activity happens in seasons, saying “pop ups come and go with the time of year.” Likewise, Participant 5 said that she “deals with emerging issues and crisis frequently, which often takes away from planned tasks.” Participant 3 stated “I don’t feel like I’ve done the same thing twice; sometimes I feel like at this point in the year, what’s the point in even planning anything…it's a lot of reactive.” She goes on to say, “it feels like I can't manage it and each school year, there's more and more expectations…I just always feel like drowning honestly.” This sense of activity was woven throughout most participants’ answers throughout the interviews.

Finally, the last theme that emerged within the counselor role includes serving as a connector or resource. This was the most-mentioned experience from participants, and in terms of serving or providing resources, participants talked about being mentors, connectors, liaisons,
creating access and opportunities for students, and so on. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I am a liaison for students to college and careers…it’s really just about filling the gaps and building bridges for students with experiences outside of school.” He goes on to discuss the importance of “encouraging them [students],” “being a mentor in different capacities,” and supporting individual students in whatever their needs are.”

Support for Urban School Counselors

To support USCs and their role, participants primarily discussed experiential opportunities and relationships. As far as school counselor training, participants discussed their internship experiences, work-related experiences working with children and adolescents, and mentor relationships. Participants stated things like, “we have a good adult culture here, so it’s easy to bounce ideas off of someone else and decompress,” “I am a hands-on trainer; the books are awesome but if you don’t know how to apply that knowledge it doesn’t matter what’s in the books anyway,” “over time, my experiences have helped me become more efficient.”

As far as relationships within the school community (staff, students, administration, parents), all participants acknowledged positive interactions, respect, and perceived support as important aspects and experiences of their role. This support seemed to allow USCs to better support students, which has been found in the literature (Clemens et al., 2009).

USC Feelings about Their Role

When participants were asked about what feelings or thoughts come to mind when experiencing their role, they said they felt 1) stressed, 2) excited, 3) overwhelmed and a sense of pressure, 4) limited in a sense because “you feel like you have to help every person or help them solve their problem but in reality sometimes you can't solve that problem,” 5) punished [taken advantage of] for being competent, 6) settled; achieving a calling or purpose, and 7) a sense of
success, with counselors sharing ‘success’ stories. Though some of these feelings were attached to certain responsibilities, most seemed interwoven throughout participants’ holistic narrative experience. USCs’ feelings were explored within various contexts of their role (e.g., excited to make a difference, stressed during various times of the school year), which is helpful, as counselors’ affective states can influence their experiences and ability to support students and families effectively. The majority of the time, these feelings seemed to bounce around and change when discussing different activities or responsibilities. For example, though USCs appeared to feel positive feelings (e.g., excitement, happiness) and supported within their school communities, they also shared more challenging feelings (e.g., stress, overwhelmed). These feelings of stress seemed most connected to USCs trying to complete multiple tasks at once, which appeared to be a large part of their role. USCs also expressed feeling excited and reflecting on stories of success (e.g., helping a student graduate). Many talked about their role as fulfilling a calling or purpose.

The results of the pilot study informed the current study to consider USCs’ years of experience and personal attributes or background and how those factors might influence USCs overall experiences or approach to their role. Also, as the pilot study was conducted before COVID-19 began in the United States, the current study took into account how the pandemic might influence the USC role as well. Finally, the pilot study highlighted how important interpretation of experience is, which altered the approach of analysis from a hermeneutic perspective to a more interpretive phenomenological focus.

**Research Questions**

The following two overarching questions guided this study and each question contained multiple prompts that were used during interviews to elicit rich examples of lived experiences:
1) What are the lived experiences of urban school counselors?

2) What does it mean to be an urban school counselor?

**Study Design and Philosophical Underpinnings**

To understand the complexity of the USC role and how USCs make sense of their experiences, this study utilized a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although many qualitative approaches seek to interpret and describe something, phenomenology differs in that it seeks to understand the personal experiences of an individual and then methodically uncovers commonality among themes (Bradshaw et al., 2007). That said, the USC role is complex and there are many factors that influence and define USCs experiences. Therefore, understanding how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences is important to this study, as interpretation embraces our being-in-the-world (Glesne, 2016). Meaning, what we experience has already been interpreted, as language, relationships, and historicity are embedded into our understanding and sense-making. Thus, an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA), which seeks to understand and investigate experiences as people live them rather than as they conceptualize them, guided this study.

This approach shares the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed, variables are complex and everchanging, and people live in the world as interpretive beings (Vagle, 2018). For example, counselors’ personalities, type of school climate, and workload may influence their perspectives about their experiences. Therefore, this study aligned with a constructivist paradigm that viewed participants as experts of their own reality and truth (Glesne, 2016). This paradigm emphasizes there is not one universal truth to be discovered, but rather every person possesses their own version of truth which develops fluidly over time as influenced by personal, social, and cultural contexts.
Methods of Data Collection: Population, Sample, Participants

This study required school counselors to be working in an urban district, so criterion sampling was utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling, which is a type of purposeful sampling, is strategic (e.g., choosing number of participants and type of site) and directly connected to this study’s research questions. Furthermore, purposeful sampling is important to phenomenological research because it reflects the person, situation, or phenomenon explored. Therefore, to aim for a homogenous sample of participants, criteria used for selecting school counselors included a graduate degree in counseling and school counselor licensure or credential in Michigan. To create homogeneity as school districts differ due to a variety of factors (e.g., funding, support, culture, supervision, type of school), participants currently worked in one urban school district in western Michigan, as defined in chapter one.

This study acquired in-depth interviews that elicited stories from 5-10 participants. Since the goal was to gather extensive detail into participants’ experiences, a smaller sample size was appropriate to achieve depth and saturation, which is also comparable to other studies that use IPA to capture participants’ experiences and how they make sense of their personal and social worlds (Christopher Roebuck & Reid, 2019; Dos Santos, 2019). Furthermore, to access participants school counselors were contacted by email.

Data Collection

In this section, data collection methods, participant recruitment, informed consent, and trustworthiness will be explored. Generally, in order to understand USC’s experiences more fully, specific characteristics of data collection included: 1) asking participants open-ended questions about their experiences, 2) discovering patterns and themes, 3) using rich description to capture the voices of participants, 4) clarifying myself as the research instrument and my positionality
within the research, 5) understanding that this approach is emergent and inductive in nature, and
6) implementing multiple methods to interpret the holistic account of the phenomenon (Creswell
& Poth, 2018; Guest et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Virtual Interviews**

To acquire depth, phenomenology utilizes interviews that uncover experiences, in order to
probe deeper into their realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Laverty, 2003; Merriam & Tisdell,
2016). As this study wanted to highlight participants’ common experiences (Creswell & Poth,
2018), USC s were asked to share their stories. Specific to the data-collection protocol, interviews
were conducted virtually and were semi-structured with pre-determined questions. Due to the
COVID-19 pandemic, interviewing participants virtually was necessary. I thanked participants
for their time and support, ensured anonymity, and left space for questions and further
comments. To promote authenticity and comfortability of participants, I encouraged them to say
what they think and feel, not what they think I might want to hear. Though probing questions
varied between participants in order to encourage depth and flow, all received the research
questions from the interview protocol. Additionally, questions typically began with words like
describe, tell me about, what does it mean to you, and so on. This allowed participants to explore
the fullness of their role. Additionally, as interviews were recorded, I was able to spend time
listening to what was not said, such as pauses and laughter, which were informative behaviors as
well.

Finally, after each interview, and to manage reflexivity issues, I wrote memos to capture
the holistic experience of the interview. This was important since I am connected to and
passionate about the topic and wanted to achieve non-skewed data. In these memos, I addressed
1) participants’ willingness and engagement in the interview process, 2) highlights that stuck out,
questions or concerns that came up, 4) reflexivity issues, and 5) overall feelings of depth and authenticity achieved. I found this process of reflexivity and reflection helpful to creating openness about my participants’ experiences.

**Virtual Focus Group**

In addition to interviews, a focus group was conducted. Though the original plan for this study included conducting observations, COVID-19 unfortunately prevented that. Therefore, conducting a focus group allowed 1) more than one voice to be heard at once (Smith et al., 2012), 2) increased depth and knowledge of the USC shared experience, and 3) increased trustworthiness of this study. Questions were structured to initiate discussion but then allowed participants’ the flexibility to explore their experiences and draw out the views of other participants. Therefore, to clarify themes participants were asked to expand on three broad questions, which included:

1) Upon hearing the preliminary themes, in what ways do these capture how you view role as a school counselor. What is not captured?

2) Upon hearing themes related to the role of the urban school counselor, what reactions do you have? Talk about the ideal role, the real role, and what you would change.

3) What are your reactions to themes related to urban school culture, community, and student influences?

4) Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a school counselor in an urban setting?

**Institutional Review Board**

Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) reviewed this study to ensure ethical considerations were met and there was a plan for dealing
with emerging ethical issues throughout the study. Specifically, ethical issues are focused on respect for individuals, concern for wellbeing, and justice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). HSIRB’s approval is required before proceeding with the study, due to the many issues needed to be considered. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize ethical considerations prior, during, and while analyzing data, which 1) understand the principles of professional associations (e.g., American Psychological Association), 2) gain permission to schools, 3) provide informed consent and disclose the study’s purpose to counselors, 4) minimize disruptions within the schools, 5) store materials and data in secure and appropriate ways, and 6) avoid exploiting or deceiving counselors. There are other considerations; however, these principles guided this particular study.

Recruitment and Informed Consent

As mentioned above in the HSIRB process, I gained permission for the study before research began (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once approved, I recruited participants. Counselors were neither pressured or required to participate in this study, and to ensure ethical recruitment a consent form explained the 1) counselors’ rights to withdraw from the study at any time, 2) purpose and procedures of the study, 3) confidentiality, and 4) any known risks and benefits for the counselors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, by ensuring ethical recruitment, an avenue opens for engagement, willingness, and authenticity in counselors sharing their stories. Also, ethical recruitment is the first step in developing rapport and personal connection with participants (Guest et al., 2013). Ways I began developing rapport with participants during the recruitment phase were promptly responding to questions and trying to be as accommodating as possible. It is imperative for participants to understand and trust the process, feel comfortable with me as the researcher and interviewer, and believe their information and stories will be
respected and cared for. Additionally, I aimed to be culturally competent, mindful of differences, friendly, and aware of my nonverbal cues like eye contact (Guest et al., 2013). I recognize that participants typically want to share their expertise, thoughts, and feelings about an experience they have had, so empowering them by actively listening, showing respect, and creating a nonthreatening environment became important ways I established rapport (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Trustworthiness in Collecting Data**

As a qualitative researcher, I followed appropriate standards to create a study that was rigorous and affixed in trustworthiness (Toma, 2011). To explain rigor of this study, I sought to be transparent throughout the process and address 1) reflexivity issues and assumptions, 2) why and how the setting, participants, and approach were chosen in relation to my research questions, and 3) the process of data collection. Also, Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that extensive field work, rich description, and rapport between participant and researcher are all ways in which the data collection process can be validated. Specifically, to provide credibility, methods like triangulation were implemented, in which multiple methods were utilized. Additionally, member checking, peer review, and a focus group confirmed themes. Additionally, to gain dependability and confirmability, I maintained a clear audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, anticipating ethical issues that emerge and how they should be dealt with is important to protecting participants from harm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One way this study worked to minimize ethical issues and create trustworthiness including creating a composite summary for each participant.

As the researcher, it was important to me to be transparent about methodological issues, such as the positionality of my past experience as an USC (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically,
I worked for eight years in Title I schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), which were underfunded, underperforming, and full of challenges. Challenges often included large caseloads, lack of support staff, language barriers between families and staff, student transience and attendance issues, behavioral issues, consequences of poverty, and many issues of crisis (e.g., homelessness, suicidal ideation, community violence, drug and alcohol abuse). For me, learning how to navigate the role included increasing my cultural awareness, as my professional experience was very different than my personal school experience. At the time, though I believe I had a stance of cultural humility (Owen et al., 2016), I had a lot to learn about my own biases, ways of oppression, resources available for students, and experiences and barriers that influence academic achievement. My first year, I listened. Pivotal to my learning was the opportunity to work with competent principals and staff. Observing these individuals and working with them helped me become a better counselor and person.

Assumptions I have about the USC role include 1) USCs often perform tasks outside of their role due to lack of resources, 2) training efforts may not be sufficient in preparing them for the emerging needs of urban students and the real-world role of school counselor, and 3) strong relationships with principals are imperative for the role to reach its potential, 4) I believe school counselors are in an important position to effect change. I also believe it is important to understand the active interaction between USCs’ attitudes, experiences, knowledge, and the environment in which they work (e.g., interactions with principal and students, opportunities for leadership and advocacy, handling crisis situations, and caseload responsibilities), in order to more fully support their work. That said, as this study aims to pass on knowledge instead of judgment, I am aware of my assumptions and engaged in what Dahlberg’s (2006) seminal work defines as bridling. The goal of bridling is not to put aside judgements, but rather focus on
becoming more familiar with my judgments, so they do not end up compromising my ability to be open to the phenomenon. Bridling involves pre-understandings about a phenomena and the ability to continually understand a phenomena as a whole throughout the whole study. Therefore, I journaled before data collection and throughout the process to understand more fully my assumptions, values, and perceptions, in order to ensure the authenticity of data collected.

**Storing Data**

Before a study begins, there needs to be a plan in place to strategically identify how data will be managed and organized during the research process. For this study, interviews were recorded on devices that provide enough file space and quality audio. Second, a computer program was utilized to organize and store data files and copies of data were saved on a backup file. All information was stored on a password-protected computer. Third, a composite list of data allowed easy retrieval of information. Finally, anonymity of participants was assured by assigning aliases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).  

**Data Analysis**

The next section will discuss the data-analytic strategies and methodological integrity of the study.

**Data Analytic Strategies**

To better understand the essence of USC experiences, the data was analyzed and coded for themes and patterns (refer to Appendix G for a brief summary of process). Identifying themes is important to IPA, as it provides an in-depth, thorough view of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2012). To begin to uncover the meaning of an experience, I engaged in reflective awareness. As mentioned previously, analysis began during data collection by noting potential codes and themes. I wrote memos after each interview about overall impressions, themes, connections with
participants, and words or statements that caught my attention. Then, to better understand the whole, I closely examined each part of the transcribed data (Smith et al., 2012). To do this, I read through each line of transcripts to gain deeper understanding. I read and reread these sentences multiple times. As phenomenological data analysis works with text, I spent quite a bit of time becoming familiar with what was said and how it was said. I noted pauses and laughter that seemed significant to the discussion. Once I felt I understood the text, I highlighted main ideas, known as significant statements (Richards, 2015; Smith et al., 2012).

From significant statements, I developed codes, which were primarily words and phrases, and clustered them together to remove redundancy. True to IPA, I zoomed in and out, in order to gain deeper understanding. I explored parts, which were made up of words and single extracts, and then zoomed out to full sentences, the full transcript, and project as a whole. This process is important to phenomenological analysis, but also understanding the USC experiences more fully. For example, as interviews took place at the beginning of the school year, most participants were busy building relationships, upcoming activities, testing, and scheduling. Therefore, when analyzing the data, it was important to consider their statements in relation to the larger context of their experience, as stress might come in waves, but not represent their ‘whole’ experience. After processing through the data multiple times, I utilized pattern coding (Saldana, 2016) as a second cycle method. The primary goal during this stage was to restructure themes from the initial coding process, in order to develop a more organized and focused list. Additionally, throughout both first and second coding cycles, I reflected on my own interpretation and positionality as the researcher.
Trustworthiness in Data Analysis

This study aims to uncover the authentic experience of school counselors and how they construct and interact with their world and experiences (Toma, 2011). As this understanding is important to support USCs, those who read this study must feel confident to consider the implications and recommendations made. I achieved this confidence by 1) reviewing with peers who have qualitative expertise, 2) creating an audit trail of the data process, and 3) providing rich, thick description in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rich, thick description was not only used in describing school counselors’ experiences, but also describing the study from beginning to end. An audit of the entire research process can help increase the dependability and confirmability of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, creating trustworthiness in data analysis will include checking with school counselors to ensure correct interpretation, and providing a focus group opportunity. This process allowed them to correct or clarify findings that I may have inaccurately interpreted or constructed. Finally, the entire process of the study, from the topic to the findings aligned with and answer my research questions.

Ultimately, the USC role is complex and many factors influence USCs experiences. Though standards and critical factors have been identified as a guide for school counselors to support urban students, the USC has been given little attention (Dye, 2014; Lee, 2005; Mitcham et al., 2009), with few studies that provide specific ways USCs actually implement and navigate their role in its’ holistic context. Therefore, an interpretive phenomenological approach was utilized to understand how USCs interpret and make meaning of their experiences. This approach was interested in how USCs understand their experiences as they live them, emphasizing that
there is not one universal truth to be discovered, but rather every person possesses their own version of truth and ways of experiencing.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to better understand the experiences of urban school counselors (USC). To gain a homogenous understanding into USCs' experiences, participants selected for this study worked in one midwestern school district. One-on-one interviews and a focus group were utilized to collect data, and data collection was conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews with six participants took place between October 21 and October 30, 2020 and averaged 82 minutes once questions began. The focus group with all six participants lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted on November 10, 2020. The data collected from interviews and focus group went through several phases of coding before yielding the study’s themes and subthemes. This chapter begins with demographic information of participants, including years of experience as a USC. Next, key findings obtained from the in-depth interviews and focus group are explored, utilizing quotes and rich description, as they related to the study’s two research questions: What are the lived experiences of urban school counselors and what does it mean to be an urban school counselor?

**Demographic Information**

All school counselors \( (n = 15) \) within one district were emailed about participating in the study. Participants who volunteered included six school counselors from six different Title I schools within the one urban district in Michigan. Four participants worked with high school aged students, while two worked in a middle school. The sample self-identified as predominately White, including 83% White \( (n = 5) \), and 16% Hispanic \( (n = 1) \). Additionally, 83% identified as female \( (n = 5 \text{ female}, n = 1 \text{ male}) \). Each participant answered demographic questions prior to the interview that included the following information: a) age, b) race, c) gender, and d) years of
experience as a school counselor. In order to maintain confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym. Please see Table 2 for specific demographic information of participants.

Table 2

Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender/Pronouns</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 - Liz</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Her, She</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 - Kyle</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>His, He</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 - Sarah</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Her, She</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 - Tully</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Her, She</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 - Luna</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Her, She</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 - Remi</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Her, She</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes

This study was not only interested in understanding the USC role or their activities, but how USCs interpret and make meaning of their experiences, while considering the unique interaction of their relationships, level of support, personal attributes, culture, affective states, and so on. Participants appeared engaged in the interview process and exuded a sense of pride and purpose when reflecting on and sharing their stories and experiences. Though different experiences and perspectives were shared, they all appeared to work toward the common goal of supporting the diverse needs of students. Throughout participants’ stories and reflections, they explored ways they served as leaders, advocates, delivered culturally responsive services, challenged inequitable practices and policies, and collaborated with those in the school community to support students’ academic, personal/social, and career development needs (ASCA, 2019a; Lee, 2005; Wingfield et al., 2010).

Phenomenological data gathered from participants yielded five major themes and six subthemes. Themes centered around four categories, including counselor responsibilities, USC connections, support for the counselor role, and environment in which they work. USCs shared a
variety of experiences that emphasized their knowledge, highlighted the need to be adaptable and flexible to accommodate variability in their role and environment, and shed light on what it means for them to be a USC. To capture this essence, theme one included (1) USC Activities: Fusion of Knowledge, Variability, and Affect. This theme yielded three subthemes, including (1.1) Differentiators for How USCs Adapt, (1.2) COVID-19, and (1.3) Purposefulness. The second and third themes aimed to capture the importance of building relationships and connections with students and staff. USCs discussed that building rapport, being trustworthy and dependable, being present to meet the diverse needs of students, and developing positive working relationships with administration and staff as paramount to effectively performing and experiencing their role. Thus, (2) Building Relationships and Providing Support for Students is the second theme of this study, which yielded (2.1) Trauma and Challenges as a subtheme. (3) Relationships with Administration and Staff emerged as the third theme. Furthermore, USCs discussed supportive and meaningful training efforts toward their professional development and self-efficacy. Hence, theme four included (4) Experiential and Educational Support. Finally, as this study focused on the lived experiences of school counselors working in an urban district, participants explored contextual factors they believed influenced student achievement and motivation and their ability to support students. Accordingly, theme five explored (5) Urban School Culture, which yielded two subthemes: (5.1) Influences and (5.2) Competency and Empathy. In the following sections, each theme and subtheme are described in detail with supporting excerpts from the transcribed data to provide rich, thick description. Table 3 summarizes the category, theme, subtheme, and an example quote.
Table 3

Themes from Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USC Responsibilities</td>
<td>(1) USC Activities: Fusion of Knowledge, Affect, and Variability</td>
<td>(1.1) Differentiators for How USC's Adapt</td>
<td>“We pretty much do whatever needs to be done to make sure we're helping kids be successful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.2) COVID-19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.3) Purposefulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>(2) Building Relationships and Providing Support for Students</td>
<td>(2.1) Trauma and Challenges</td>
<td>“I think everyone would agree the only way we're going to make change is by building relationships with students…change happens when they trust you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>(3) Relationships with Administration and Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Having an admin team that understands and trusts you is number one…it’s really valuable.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for USC Role</td>
<td>(4) Experiential and Educational Opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m confident with my skill set because of them [professors]. They encouraged participation in associations, the community, and encouraged us to step out of our comfort zones.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>(5) Urban School Culture</td>
<td>(5.1) Influences</td>
<td>“You're going to have different traumas, races, experiences. You can't assume all is going to be the same. It doesn't work that way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(5.2) Competency and Empathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme One: USC Activities: Fusion of Knowledge, Variability, and Affect**

Similar to existing literature and the previous pilot study, the USC role was described by participants as lively and variable. To capture this liveliness, the first theme not only considers USC’s’ responsibilities, but also how their knowledge, perceptions, feelings, school context, and role variability fuse together to inform their lived experiences. To begin, participants’ activities, as they related to ASCA’s guidelines, are briefly explored, followed by a discussion about role
variability and adaptability. Next, participants’ success stories and navigating challenges are examined. Finally, three subthemes are addressed, including: (1.1) Differentiators of How USCs Adapt, (1.2) COVID-19, and (1.3) Purposefulness. These subthemes prompt further understanding into how USCs adapt, how they have adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and sense of purpose or calling they experience as a USC.

Though participants’ narratives varied, all were knowledgeable about ASCA’s guidelines for their role. Following ASCA’s standards, Sarah said, “it makes it easier to ensure we are hitting key areas to help students get to where they need to be,” which allows the focus to be on the whole child instead of one piece (ASCA, 2019a, 2019b). In terms of providing psychoeducational lessons, both Kyle and Luna discussed going into classrooms as a way to support the needs of students. Kyle, who works with ninth and tenth graders, stated he enjoys supporting students and helping them build their self-confidence.

I kind of am that motivator, getting them [students] started. The ninth-grade year is challenging for a lot of reasons…it's a transition. You want to get academics started off on the right foot; it's the academics portion that we're really focusing on…like what are you going to do four years from now? Where are you going to college? Are you going into the workforce, the military?

Similarly, Luna, who works in a middle school, indicated that one of her goals last year was to develop a guidance lesson curriculum “based on the mindsets and behaviors [of students]…focusing on academic progress, positive relationship building, and developing social emotional skills.” She went on to say she “looks at what ASCA recommends, what the tasks are, and how to integrate that” with what her school district and administrators ask of her.
ASCA’s guidelines include advocating, providing access, expanding opportunities for students to excel, and developing a comprehensive counseling program (ASCA, 2019a, 2019b). Remi emphasized her role is to be “an advocate for students” and both Kyle and Sarah discussed the importance of increasing opportunities for them. Kyle shared, “it is important to expand options for students…the talent is there, we just need to help pull it out.” Sarah added that she sees her “role as one that supports students, especially in middle school…expose them to different things and tools they’re going to need.” She continued, “if they don't get support anywhere else, they at least got it from me.” For example, after recognizing a need in her school, she organized and led a small group to help students build relationships with one another.

In terms of working with seniors and preparing students for what is next after high school, Tully stated her role “is primarily academic counseling versus mental health counseling.” She spends most of her time “tracking students down, like hey, you need to do this for graduation and checking on grades…getting them to realize that it is so important…really having those conversations with students.” In terms of supporting college readiness, Liz shared that she partners with a local university to support first generation students. She began this partnership when recognizing that she serviced a large population of students who would be the first in their family to attend college. Furthermore, as ASCA calls school counselors to develop a comprehensive program to meet the diverse needs of students, organization becomes important (ASCA, 2019b). Thus, Liz stated that part of her role “is to oversee and make sure programming and other initiatives happen within the counseling department,” which includes two other counselors. “Bringing the group together…recognizing the different skill sets of staff” is important to Liz and her role. For example, “this is college month, so we are making sure we have programs that engage 6th through 12th grade students.” Moreover, to provide services to all
students, Liz stated, “we [counselors] keep a running list of every student we have talked to, and the ones we haven't, those are the kids we reach out to.”

Though participants explored ways they support the academic, social/emotional, and career development needs of students, woven throughout their experiences were attitudes about being “adaptable,” “flexible,” and “resilient,” as the role is dynamic and ever-changing to meet the diverse needs of students and families (Lapan et al., 2014). Adaptability, as described by all participants, is a necessary component of the role, which they all appeared to not only acknowledge but accept, as “activities change from day to day.” This idea of being flexible and adaptable aligns with previous literature asserting that USC's act on many things simultaneously (Forbes, 2010). Thus, participants snickered when prompted with questions about how they make decisions or what a typical day looks like. Kyle shared “your day goes by quickly. You're constantly having something to do...there's never a dull moment.” Remi added, “the role is so varied and varies within a school district.” She continued, “it [the role] differs from day to day...If you ask me today, I am frustrated because I held office hours for two hours and no students showed up...how am I supposed to help you? But other days, I feel excitement.”

Part of being adaptable includes navigating emerging issues. Remi stated, “you don't know what you're going to walk into.”

Over the years, I've worked both as a teacher and counselor, and I've walked into situations where there was a car accident in the middle of the school day that killed students in our building, or a shooting, or suicide...You don't know what students are dealing with and what they're going to share with you.

Similarly, Sarah emphasized “you have to be ready to roll with the punches, especially during this time of COVID when changes and decisions are made last minute.” Referring to pre-
pandemic times, she stated “I can't even tell you what my typical day looks like, it can be anything from answering emails or delivering classroom lessons...most of my days are not scheduled.” She clarified, “a lot of times it's me supporting a student, taking them out of a situation...walking around, talking if they want, or doing whatever to get them out of that space.” In terms of managing emergent issues, Tully stated she attends to “whatever is most urgent.” Likewise, Sarah emphasized that “any school or student emergency trumps whatever else I am doing” and Luna added that “safety is always the first priority. If there's a student that has a self-harm statement or there's something going on that needs to be immediately addressed, it always moves to the top of the list.” After attending to an emergency, Luna described her second priority would be following through on a classroom lesson that was planned with a teacher.

Along with navigating emerging issues, all participants, with various levels of experience, reflected on times when they needed to adjust or adapt. Periods of adjustment included developing a new counseling program, learning new ways to perform the role (e.g., reaching new standards or navigating a pandemic), and transferring to a building with new leadership. Thus, role adjustment seemed necessary at different stages in a USC’s career, not only the initial years.

In terms of developing a counseling program, Luna stated, “I couldn't hand you a binder and say, this is my counseling program because I feel like it's still being developed and built.” She continued,

I feel like my first year was just kind of getting acquainted with the school...and then last year, we had a change in administrator, so now I know what my students are like but what does administration want for the counseling department and how is that different? And then, of course, COVID happened.
Similarly, though Remi has nine years of experience, she recently moved to another school within the same district and is now split between two main programs. She described her role as “getting my feet under me in terms of how I want it [the counseling program] to look and what I want it to do.” Furthermore, reflecting on her early years, Tully shared “when I first started, there were probably four times a week I would be here until four or five o'clock.” However, over time, she has become more comfortable to set boundaries. That said, due to COVID-19 and the transition from in-person learning to online learning, she found herself again working until five o’clock. Reflecting on this adjustment, Tully shared “I would be at home sitting at my computer until five o'clock in the afternoon and my kids would be like, Mom, why are you still working? Or my husband would say, are you still in a meeting?”

As the USC role was described as ever-changing to meet the demands of students and families, participants stated it can “be tricky to manage sometimes,” consist of “a little bit of everything,” include “non-counseling duties,” and “feel frustrating when not performing the role we were hired to do.” Luna stated that non-school counseling related tasks take up 50% of her job, such as serving as testing coordinator, developing a master schedule, and scheduling students into classes. “I love being a school counselor…I just wish that more time could be spent in direct student contact…it seems like sometimes I'm not the best utilized in my role.” She continued, “there are so many other things I could and should be doing that can create a better school environment, but I am not able to because so much of my time is taken up with non-counseling tasks.” Similarly, Remi stated, “the majority of time is spent basically on scheduling, credit auditing, making sure that kids get the classes that they need to graduate.” Performing non-counseling duties is not new to the literature (Chandler et al., 2018; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Studer, 2005). Reflecting on non-counseling tasks, Tully
shared, “if I never had to worry about a schedule, or changing a schedule, or looking at a master schedule, or balancing a class again that would be enough for me to say this is my ideal role.” She continued, “it prevents me from creating those relationships that are key to success [seniors graduating] at the end of the year.” Furthermore, “if it was off my table, it would give me opportunities to be in the hallways, classrooms, lunchroom, and not think, holy crap, I have five hours of work sitting on my desk.” Similarly, Sarah stated “my longer days are days I'm not interacting with students, and I'm doing stuff like scheduling.”

In terms of role design and how that influences USC activities and ability to support students, Sarah reflected on her recent experience being split between two different schools, one she described as close to her “ideal role” and the other being newly developed. “I'm finding my groove in one place and developing a program in the other. You talk about valuing the position, but then split a counselor between two schools that need completely different things. That doesn't make sense to me.” This sense of frustration likely influences Sarah’s overall experiences, which was also echoed by Remi, who splits her time between schools as well. This example of role design and role structure prompted a deeper look into how USCs are able to adapt, going beyond the singular focus of whether or not they have adapted. Though all USCs emphasized that being flexible and adaptable are necessary characteristics to performing their role effectively, there appeared to be experiential differences to how USCs were actually able to adapt. These differences appeared to contribute to “how” USC’s adapted or felt about adapting, which is the first subtheme under USC Activities. This insight is important when understanding how to better support USCs as they navigate and adapt to countless tasks, contexts, relationships, and issues.
Subtheme (1.1): Differentiators for How USCs Adapt

Differentiators for how USCs adapted and experienced their role included years of experience, personal attributes, level of support, and role design. Liz, who has worked as a school counselor for 26 years, suggested that being creative and having a growth mindset are necessary factors to how she approaches her role. “You must adopt a growth mindset, constantly adjusting to bettering yourself and role as time goes on…because it can be hard to meet with students rapid fire one after another…while you have emails and your phone's going off. It can be really rattling.” In terms of both experience and personality characteristics, Tully, who has worked as a USC for nine years, stated “I'm super laid back…when I make a list of what I want to do that day, I'm fully aware there's a 95% chance that none of this will get done…we just got to roll with it.” She also mentioned, USCs need to have the ability to separate themselves from what they may have faced throughout the day. “If I couldn't walk out of here and leave 95% of the stuff I encountered here, I would never make it at home. Part of that is giving yourself grace.” Similarly, Kyle explored the importance of self-care “because you bring on so much.” In terms of his personality, he stated “I'm not a scheduled person…I try to always be present for those things that pop up. It's expect the unexpected in this position.” He continued, “I may have a list of things to get done, but most likely will not get all of them done. You have to allow yourself that space to be able to focus on the current need of what's going on.” Likewise, Remi stated that it is important to understand, when completing tasks, “you may not get it done. And then you'll have to regroup and figure it out again…you can't get frustrated, angry, and you can't shut other people out because you're there to help other people.”

Though a USC who is more laid-back may be able to roll with emerging issues and advocate for their role more easily than someone less laid-back, Tully emphasized that a mixture
of personality and years of experience strongly influence how they experience their role and are able to advocate for it.

As far as your own personality and comfortableness with your admin and staff, I think the longer you're in a position, the easier it is to advocate for yourself. Somebody who might have just started in a building is going to have a harder time saying hey, that's not really my role, when you're still trying to figure out what your role is. When I started I remember working till five o'clock every day, because I felt like I had to do all of this work, when now that I'm seven years in, I can say, you know what, this really is not my role. Yet, it’s something I need to get done and will get done in my normal work hours. So I think it takes time.

Along with years of experience and personality characteristics, level of support and logistics of the role (e.g., role design) appeared to influence how USCs adapt or are able to adapt. Remi reflected on being split between two schools with little support staff. “The hardest thing is when things come up [emergencies] and I’m at two different sites…if a kid is in crisis and they need something, I don't have the ability to physically check up on them until the next day.” Thus, though she is knowledgeable about how to support students and recognizes their needs, it appears she is unable to fulfill certain aspects of her role due to being split between buildings.

Furthermore, though participants worked in the same district, they received different levels of support in their buildings (e.g., number of counselors, registrars). For example, one participant works in a school that is currently ranked in the bottom 5% of schools in Michigan, which suggests there is a decline in student achievement or that outcomes are minimal over time (Michigan’s Official Education Data Source, 2020b). On the other end, one of the schools is among the best in the state. Though participants shared some similarities, there are also vast
differences between these USCs’ experiences. For example, Liz works with two other counselors and has a registrar who performs a lot of the scheduling duties, which allows her more time to support students and implement program initiatives. However, this additional support is not a reality for some of the other participants, which appeared to differentiate how others were able to adapt and experience their role. Remi stated that she is one of the only support staff in her buildings, “so it's never going to be that way. There’s never going to be a time where I'm not involved in scheduling or asked to do something outside of my role…we each represent different programs, it's not one size fits all.”

In terms of receiving support, Sarah reflected on her experience working with a small staff. Though she completes non-counseling activities due to lack of other support staff, she acknowledged her principal allows her time to also complete initiatives more aligned with ASCA’s guidelines. For her, the frustration resides with the rest of the staff’s lack of understanding about her role, which has been a thread throughout the literature for years (Chandler et al., 2018; DeKruyf et al., 2013). Though the ASCA National Model was intended to provide standard understanding of the role to reduce confusion, ambiguity still exists. “I feel like it's no joke when people say, no one really knows what a counselor does. I definitely feel like there are gaps in understanding between staff and the counselor.” She further described, “I'm not doing it [extra duties] because it's my role. I'm doing it to help the school and the staff, so when those wires get crossed, it's really frustrating to remind them that I'm not doing this every day.”

Likewise, Luna stated that sometimes she feels staff members share the view that she completes certain tasks because she “has nothing else to do.” She went on to say, “my role could be more enrichment focused, but these other tasks [scheduling] are necessary in order to make the building run.” This tension between what the USC role is supposed to be when supports are in
place and how it actually functions for USCs in their prospective buildings emphasizes the diverse experiences USCs can have within the same district, and how they are or are not able to adjust and adapt their role to fit the needs of students and families.

As every school requires different things and has varying degrees of supports and needs, the question becomes is uniformity of the USC role possible or necessary? Kyle stated that “as a district, we need a plan that defines what our roles are…we need to have a clear and defined role that everybody knows.” Sarah added, “you need to advocate for yourself, knowing what you as a counselor need for your own career and your own school.” In advocating for clear role expectations, Liz shared “counselors really are going to have to start pulling back from things [additional non-counseling tasks] because our kids are going to come back to school [after COVID-19] needing more from us than we have to give.” Though advocating for the USC role was acknowledged as necessary to the profession, recognizing what might influence USCs’ advocacy efforts may encourage increased relevant training and understanding. For example, as far as being able to advocate for your role, Tully claimed that “the longer you're in a position, the easier it is to advocate.”

Along with understanding USC activities and ways they adjust, it is important to consider their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the second subtheme under USCs’ Activities. The coronavirus is still a raging pandemic across the world. In fact, recently Michigan high schools and universities have moved all their classes online (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, 2020) as cases continue to spread. Therefore, recognizing how the pandemic has influenced the USC role and ways USCs have adapted to serve historically marginalized students online is important when understanding their lived experiences this particular school year.
**Subtheme (1.2): COVID-19**

Existing literature has shown that inequity and limited access for underserved youth and families are further perpetuated in times of crisis (Kochhar, 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Oppel Jr. et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is no different. Research shows people who are Black and Latino as more likely to contract COVID-19 and die from the virus than people who are White (Oppel Jr. et al., 2020). People of color also carry the economic consequences more harshly (Kochhar, 2020), such as losing income, jobs, housing and food security. These consequences can have lasting influences on the social-emotional, cognitive, and academic wellness of those affected (Mitchell, 2020). The school district participants worked remained virtual the first half of the 2020-2021 school year. Thus, all USCs discussed opportunities and challenges associated with connecting to and servicing historically marginalized students in this capacity.

Kyle explored having to “learn how to use technology and other means of connecting with students.” Sarah added that “translating everything into a virtual environment has been challenging” and that she relies on the connections she built with students last year to connect this year. She went on to say it is “tricky connecting with students, like I can't force you to come to my office, I can't sit with you in class and see what's happening. So it's been really hard to connect with them.” Similarly, Remi said “the biggest thing I'm grappling with is how to get my services in front of them [students] and get them to grasp them. My role hasn't changed, I'm here for you, but I don't know how to be here for you.” Referring to high school students, she continued

> our kids are not responsive to virtual…employers are working them full time, so I think the lore of adulting is really pulling right now. Also, it can be anything from inconsistent technology, responsibilities to care for younger siblings or children of their own, or they
just can't find a quiet space in the house. No one is reiterating to them that, hey, if you don't get this done, you're not going to graduate. So I'm trying to work on ways of meeting with them.

Furthermore, Luna emphasized that while at school, she would often respond to crises, which is difficult now that school is online. “I feel like students aren’t getting that support right now...there's only so much virtually you can do in those situations and it's overwhelming because I'll have virtual office hours and nobody comes.” Thus, to continue providing opportunities and access for students, participants explored ways they have adjusted their role.

Luna, along with other participants, described utilizing Google Classroom. “I do a lot of asynchronous stuff. I have a couple different resources posted, like college info. If there's something going on and they [students] want to have an individual meeting, they can set something up on the calendar.” Similarly, Liz shared that she keeps a running list of all the questions students asked during the week. Then on Friday, she sends out a fact sheet with the top 10 questions of the week. She went on to discuss how her “student appointments have been positively amazing, like so much better than when I was in my office because there's no one walking by. There's no one at the door. All I can do is focus on you [the student].” Furthermore, Luna stated “in some ways I'm grateful for virtual learning right now, just because that gives me more time than I normally have to actually develop the back-end part [planning and developing a more comprehensive counseling program]...to be more ASCA informed.” Finally, Liz reflected on the initial panic of transitioning to supporting students online and how she has adjusted and redefined part of her role.

First, I panicked but then I sat down and did it. And then I felt really good about it and taught other people how to do it. So then you're like, I got this. It’s very empowering and
I am such a better counselor today than I was last year at this spot, and I will be better moving forward…I feel like it's been an opportunity to rebrand our business. You know, I think everyone has that view of the counselor's office with tons of papers stacked up and everything's dusty. Shit, I don't want that. And you know, that's part of this whole rebranding. A totally different way of how I do my job. I will keep virtual appointments. Why should I require a kid to come to my office? And why should they have to come down to the office to schedule, they should be able to schedule from wherever they want. And then they either come to you when they’re at a band festival and have a 15-minute break…you know, we're all going to start using our time a little more wisely.

Along with describing how they have creatively adjusted their role this past year to meet the needs of students in a virtual format, participants shared a range of feelings, such as excitement, frustration, and pride. Emotions were often shared within the same breath. For example, Tully expressed her school year has felt “easier than a normal year because I don't have people [interruptions] in my face.” That said, she went on to described a genuine sadness about not seeing students and being able to connect with them as she did before. This sense of embodying both positive and negative feelings appeared to demonstrate that USCs experience their role differently at different times. For instance, though participants described their role, especially when considering COVID-19 and completing non-counseling tasks, as frustrating or stressful, they all agreed with Remi’s sentiment that “we pretty much do whatever needs to be done to make sure we're helping kids be successful.” This shared goal seemed to inform a consistent sense of purpose, appearing hierarchically greater than a USCs fluctuation of feelings, which is the third and final subtheme under USCs activities.
Subtheme (1.3): Purposefulness

When describing their activities, participants explored a sort of calling or purpose. This sense of purpose appeared to remain constant even when participants’ feelings and activities fluctuated. Participants often exhibited emotional responses, such as tears, happiness, pride when describing what their role means to them. Sarah stated, “being at the school is so exciting. It’s such a cool program and it's the connections I've created…I wouldn’t change it for the world…it’s why I'm doing this.” Similarly, Kyle said he felt “settled, like this is where I should be and what I should be doing. I am enjoying what I'm doing, it's not work anymore…I'm where I belong.” Liz shared that her role means “the world” to her. She went on to say, “I think during this whole mess of the world we're in, it further cements this is where I'm supposed to be.” She added, “I always wanted to be a helper. [Before working as a school counselor] I was a special education teacher and had 15 kids in my room. I kept thinking, if I can help these 15…I can certainly help more.”

“It's probably cliché to say,” Tully stated, “but it means I can hopefully make an imprint on the next generation….there are kids where I think, man, you are going to do so much. I can't wait to see what you will do for society and your family.” Kyle described he is passionate about working with students, being that “person that will nudge students toward their dreams and goals, regardless of the background they come from…creating their own niche instead of falling in the footprints of the generations before them.” Similarly, Luna described that she, “always wanted to work with teenagers and do it in a way that gave everyone in the school equal access.” She continued, “I love those moments where the true school counseling role comes through.” Tully, a White woman, added that her students have taught her more than she will ever be able to teach them.
One thing they’ve taught me is about racism and all they are going through right now. I don't think in a million years I would have had the insight and ability to wrap my brain around the deeper issues that are currently going on. Now, I am able to step back and say, but did we think about this or even challenge other people, especially my own family, about White privilege.

In terms of reflecting how past experiences shaped participants choices to become a school counselor, Sarah stated, “I took a year off after I graduated and was like, I hate this feeling. I need to make sure no one else is feeling the same way, so I wanted to help students in that aspect.” Similarly, Tully explained she wanted to become a high school counselor to help students explore options after high school, due to her lack of guidance from her school counselor.

I enjoy high school-aged students. I loved high school myself. I had a really good experience. I went to a really small school…but I had a crappy counselor. I didn't know what FAFSA was when I left high school. Like, I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know how to fill out college applications. That was never a priority, nobody talked to me about that.

Likewise, Sarah never really interacted with her counselor throughout high school either. “I always think back to what if my counselor was there, would things be different? If my counselor brought this up to me…those interactions, would that have changed anything? Luna added that she had a close relationship with her middle school counselor, which helped her through challenges she experienced at the time. “I had been going through some family stuff, and she talked with me about it and was just a kind, friendly person to be around…and I think that really helped me in my middle school years.” She went on to say her high school counselor was
disengaged. Thus, lacking quality support from a school counselor during her secondary educational experience prompted her, along with other participants, to provide a different experience for students they serve.

This first theme explored USCs activities, fluctuation of feelings, perceptions, ways they adjust, and sense of purpose they feel associated with their role. Though participants felt connected to their role in terms of fulfilling a calling or purpose, their experiences appeared to increase positively when they felt connected to students, families, administration, and those in the school community-at-large. Because these relationships appeared important to USCs and influenced their ability to perform their role, the second theme will focus on their relationships with students and ways they support them through successes and challenges.

**Theme Two: Building Relationships and Providing Support for Students**

USCs interact with students throughout the day, and literature suggests these relationships influence both USCs experiences and their ability to affect change (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bidell, 2012; Cole & Grothaus, 2014; Hayden et al., 2015; Henderson, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Lapan et al., 2014; Lee, 2005; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013; Martinez et al., 2017; Mitcham et al., 2009; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Williams et al., 2016; Wingfield et al., 2010). Furthermore, having a safe and positive relationship with a caring adult (e.g., USC, teacher) is one of the single most important factors to mitigating the effects of trauma students may experience is (Lapan et al., 2014; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2016). All participants explored the importance of building relationships with students and providing support relevant to their needs. This section begins by exploring USC connections and experiences with students, followed both by success stories and stories underlining challenges and trauma.
When describing connections and rapport with students, words like “being present,” “available,” “understanding,” “open-minded,” and “honest” were used. In order to be more present with students and available to them, Liz shared that she answers all of her emails before leaving her house in the morning. “So when I get to school, I'm not a frantic mess. I can drop my bag off. I can put my coat down. I can walk to the cafeteria and say good morning to every child as they walk through.” Similarly, Luna added, “I am in the lunchroom at lunch, not for lunchroom duty necessarily, but as a way of getting to know students and having that kind of touch point contact.” Likewise, Sarah stated, 

I get a sense in the morning while down at breakfast, you know, who's having a rough day and see how they're doing...or just sit and talk to students about what's going on...so I am the face they see in the morning, and if they need anything, they'd see me there. 

Like, you need to see me to at least know who I am. So, I go into classes. I was really good at math, so I sometimes see what they are working on and when I have free time I help them out with their math.

Along with being present and available, participants discussed the importance of honesty and trust as key components to building relationships with students. During the focus group, Tully stated, “I think everyone would agree that the only way we're going to make change is by building relationships with students...change happens when they trust you.” Additionally, Sarah emphasized, “I'm not going to trust anybody to talk to I don't know...so it is definitely a lot of being present and honest with students.” Tully added, “I don't play games with them [students]...whatever I say is just the honest truth. I'm not going to lie to you.” Furthermore, Liz shared, “you know, if I think a line in an essay stinks, I'm like, we have to rewrite this.”

Finally, not only do you need to be honest with students, Liz added “you need to be honest with
yourself. “You don't get to come in Monday and be crappy and you can't walk around hiding either. You have to be able to talk about what is bothering you so you can get back to working with students.” Thus, participants appeared to take pride in the fact they were honest with students. Honesty was viewed as a form of respect and support.

Along with transparency, participants discussed the importance of consistency and making space for students’ diverse needs. For example, Sarah stated,

I tell them [students] I respect how you're feeling and understand you're angry but I don't appreciate how you're talking to me, so let's take a second and you can come back to me whenever you're ready. I think being involved… if you just put everything out there and be like, whether you like it or not, I'm here, however you decide to go with that is up to you. But this is how I'm going to react to you and my role each and every time. Just know that I'm here and I care.

Kyle reflected on being open to talk about race and other effects of systemic racism his students experience. He works with quite a few students who “are afraid to walk down the street,” saying “I don't know if ICE is going to show up at my door. I don't know what my options are. You know, I feel like there's nothing for me here, because I'm afraid to even mention this to anybody.” In terms of providing access, Kyle talked about the importance of being knowledgeable about opportunities and then extending them to students. For example, a new scholarship from a local college, specifically for students who are undocumented, has made college a possibility. “I was working with a student a lot last year who was definitely afraid of not being able to go to college and didn’t want to put their information on government documents. This scholarship opened the door.”

As this study was interested in USCs real experiences and interactions with students,
participants were asked to share stories about times they were supportive. When asked, participants lit up and exuded a sense of pride, accomplishment, and genuine care for students throughout their stories. Supporting the academic needs of students and helping them graduate brought a sense of happiness to participants’ faces. Remi described supporting a student, who was in foster care at the time and severely deficient in credits to graduate. After a lot of hard work, “she ended up graduating in March… and I'm like, girl, can you believe you made this up in less than a year?” The student responded, “if you'd asked me a year ago if I'd even graduate from high school…I cannot believe this is happening.” The student ended up graduating with “over a three-point GPA.” Tully added, “there is a consistent time every year…graduation. I’m just watching them [students] with such pride in their faces and excitement of what's coming next, but also the fact that they did it.” She went on to describe a specific student she worked with who was experiencing homelessness at the time. She explained,

the student pretty much gave up and I was like, no, you don't get to give up. That's not an option here. He failed a class…I can remember the teachers saying it was hard to fail him because he was such a personable kid with an amazing personality and just loved life. So, he had two weeks to make up the class and I can remember every day walking down there and being like, how are you doing? What do you need? Then he finished the day before graduation. After walking across the stage, he came and gave me a really big hug and was like, I couldn’t have done this without you.

Throughout participants’ narratives, one thing became abundantly clear. Being present for the diverse needs of students looks different for each individual and encounter. Sometimes it means being quiet. Sometimes it means providing resources. Sometimes it means challenging policies. However, in all instances, participants were present and available to students. For
instance, Kyle discussed using social media to help a student, who otherwise was limited in ways to contact staff. “A student received a letter from the University of Michigan in the middle of the summer and they weren't able to reach their school counselor because everybody was off and disconnected.” Kyle goes on to say that “the student and parent reached out [via Facebook messenger], saying we need a response by the 18th. So, by her reaching out in that way and me getting a letter to her she ended up getting accepted.” Additionally, in terms of being present, Sarah reflected on a time she worked with a middle school-aged student who “was having the worst time.” This student did not easily divulge information and one day ran under a table to hide. Sarah joined the student under the table. “We didn’t talk much…sometimes that's not what’s needed. Sometimes students don't need to talk through everything, but kind of just be there…so we sat together.” Her presence and stillness highlights the need for USC's to be in-tuned with students’ needs and what is going on around them, in order to provide appropriate support.

Advocating on behalf of students’ needs can alter their entire educational experience. For example, Remi stated that “last year, a student decided to come out as transgender and began dressing in women's clothing and identified as a female with female pronouns…so I helped her get it changed in the system.” This simple change in the system informed teachers and other staff of the student’s correct pronouns, which was so meaningful to the student that “she came up and gave me a great big hug.” This recognition and form of advocacy allowed the student to feel supported and heard. Furthermore, Luna explored working with a student who was “struggling with her sexuality, determining her sexuality, feeling like she couldn't talk to her family about it, and feeling she wouldn't be supported by her family.” After spending some time with the student, “she [the student] came in and said, hey, I figured it out. I know what I am. I know who I am,
and you're the first person I'm telling.” Luna beamed, “the student felt safe enough to tell me and be open.” Affirming this supportive role, Liz reflected on working with a student whose father was in jail for drug abuse, saying “it makes you feel so good that you're the first person they get back to about their successes…those moments when that kid feels so comfortable with you to spill their guts…these kids need us.” Along with stories about success and overcoming obstacles, USC's shared stories about working with students who have experienced various challenges or trauma, which is a subtheme under this section. This section begins with USC's thoughts about trauma and then ways they support students through difficult experiences.

**Subtheme (2.1): Trauma and Challenges**

Recognizing trauma students experience or have experienced is important and learning about the effects of trauma is essential for USC's to be able to pinpoint appropriate resources that support student learning, behavior, or relationships (Martinez et al., 2020). A traumatic event can be scary, dangerous, and threatening to a child. Traumatic experiences can also trigger strong reactions (emotional, physical, physiological) that can last long after the actual event. These experiences can occur outside the family (e.g., school shooting, neighborhood violence) or inside the family, such as abuse (domestic violence, physical, sexual) or losing a loved one unexpectedly (NCTSN, 2020). Due to the prevalence and ramifications of trauma, this section explores USC's perspectives on trauma, followed by stories about supporting students through challenging experiences.

Reflecting on the word “trauma,” Tully stated, “I think there is a lack of realization that our kids have experienced trauma. I think we hear the word trauma and immediately think like murder, rape, or something like that.” She described a training she attended a couple years ago that reframed her thinking about trauma. The training explored how consequences of trauma can
build and intensify (race-related or poverty-related trauma). “I think we don’t always acknowledge that trauma for me is going to be different than trauma for you…if somebody [staff member] doesn't see a major event, they believe you should be fine.” Luna added when trauma and consequences of trauma are not understood or dismissed, students may be “labeled as problems or difficult.” Furthermore, Tully emphasized that staff who have not experienced trauma or understand how the effects of trauma might be presented, it might be “hard to wrap their brain around it.” Thus, training and open discussions on trauma and trauma-informed methods is necessary when working with students and families in schools. When working with students who have experienced trauma, Kyle stated, “you have to be patient, understanding, and listen to them.” To encourage students to confide in you, “it takes time to do that,” and in many cases, “we have to get other community members involved, like CPS. I think that's the hardest part of the job.” Kyle continued, “I’m not going to be able to help everybody myself, someone else is going to have to come along and assist too…you're going to have to rely on those outside resources to give the additional assistance that's needed.” All participants discussed ways they partner with community organizations to support students, as USC's cannot support the whole student on their own. Thus, relationships with administration, staff, and community members become very important. For example, Tully who identified herself as a collaborator, works a lot to “form positive community partnerships that are doing things like mentoring…bringing people together to support students in the building,” especially when dealing with experiences of trauma.

In terms of the prevalence of trauma, Sarah believes that most of her students have experienced some sort of trauma. She reflected,

you don't know what a student brings you, you don't know what's on their back when
they come to school. I think it’s so heartbreaking to even listen to some of these stories, or when you look through a student's record or talk to a parent, and they're telling you stuff you don't even realize…wow, this is what you've [students] been dealing with. And you start making connections with behavior, or attendance or academics, and you're like, okay, now it’s starting to make sense….you start connecting those dots. You know, you've had students where anger was their only language, and it's so hard to calm down a student when they're expressing fight or flight.

Furthermore, Luna emphasized the importance of believing students and, once a student’s challenge or trauma is understood, believing they can heal. “Maybe they are really broken, but what if they can heal?…Learning they have a choice how they react to something…and some days the choice is harder than others, but that's what we're here to work through together.”

Viewing a difficult experience or trauma in this way eliminates the act of rigidly labeling a child or behavior as a “problem.”

Along with exploring trauma conceptually, participants shared stories about working with students who have experienced trauma or challenges. Challenges centered around students feeling misunderstood, community violence, family issues, and homelessness. Tully shared that students “come in here sobbing sometimes and I'll say, do you want me to go with you to talk to the teacher? And they’re like, they won't understand. There's this fear they're not going to be understood.” When exploring racial discrimination, Tully empathetically reflected “if every time a student walks into a store the employee gives them a funny look because of the color of their skin, and then they go to school and the teacher does the same thing,” how are they expected to learn from that teacher? “I think people see bad behavior and they say, well, you're just bad or you're not motivated, or you don't care, that kind of thing.” Thus, multicultural competence is
important to working with urban students. She went on to share an example of students she has worked with from refugee camps.

Our kids from refugee camps, they might have super loving parents but are around people carrying guns to make sure they stay in line, or don't exit the area. They saw that every day. And there's this constant fear of, you know, a man in a uniform. And we have security guards in uniform, and they're walking around making sure you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. And that's a trigger and can really affect a kid's ability to learn effectively or even communicate effectively.

In terms of community violence, Remi reflected on a time she worked in another urban school district. “There were eight shootings and out of those shootings, six burials. I mean, you would go home for a break, and you knew you were going to lose somebody because that's what was happening there.” Specifically, the last year she worked in that district, a “student on his way to a basketball banquet was shot and killed. Afterward, the community came together to help his family bury him, and I worked with the students who were with him at the time of the shooting.” She went on to say that “unfortunately, of the three kids that were with him when it happened, two died for the same reasons [gang-related] in their early 20s.”

Along with community violence, participants discussed family issues, foster care, and homelessness. Sarah discussed working with a student who was exhibiting impulsive behaviors and experiencing internal family challenges. Initially, the student did not want to talk, but eventually warmed up and began talking through her challenges. “We talked through it” and though the student appeared to benefit from the support, “those conversations did not change the student’s behavior or challenges right away.”

It doesn't work that way…I remind students that I'm going to give you the tools and I'm
going to help you with the awareness. When you are ready, it is there for you. When you're ready, I'm here to help you with it. So what I keep reminding her, as she's still dealing with these things, is that you have a choice as to how you want to react to this. You can decide how you want to go through this...you know, here are your options, whatever you decide is completely up to you. But here are some [productive] options.

In terms of navigating challenges with no easy solution, Tully stated, “I love my job and most of the time I can deal with challenges, because I've learned how to, but it can be overwhelming sometimes.” She reflected, “I've walked into my principal’s office with tears streaming down my face because I have a kid a week before Christmas who has nowhere to live.” Similarly, Luna shared “it's like, how do you help a student navigate a bad situation when you can't change anything. I mean, his biggest fear was going back into foster care and being separated from his brothers.” She continued, “how can I help to the best degree possible? Sometimes there's not a good solution, which is the worst feeling, like, I know you're hurting and need so much help, but there's only so much that can be done.” Though many situations do not have simple solutions, participants emphasized, as they did when talking about building trust with students, the importance of being present and available to students’ diverse needs. Being that supportive and caring person in a student’s life can make a difference as they navigate complex challenges.

Finally, when referring to the effects of COVID-19, Liz stated, “I don't know if it's abuse, but families are frustrated. They've been home for a while...there’s food instability, not being able to pay bills. You don't mean to take it out on your kids, but that's where it is.” When talking with students, she expressed “I always start with this is an adult issue but maybe mom's acting this way, because she has to lower the heat to 54.” Trying to understand the whole picture of what families are going through allows for more targeted support. For example, last year Liz got
a call from an older brother of a student she was working with. She stated that the brother explained his dad was recently arrested and he was worried about his younger brother. “I worked with that entire family unit, everything from the kid worrying about staying at college, his brother at my school, and mom who barely spoke English.” The mother was also on disability but was now walking to work two miles to compensate for her husband’s loss of income.

The old me would have tried to manage it all. The more experienced me said, okay, you know, mom, who is your best friend? Can I reach out to her and share this with her. Then, I can connect you and some agencies and she can help you navigate that…so tapping into resources. And then I just have the student in front of me who is at my school. I think that was like a huge growth moment for me. Because in the past, I would have wanted to take care of everybody.

Likewise, “serving as a connector,” Sarah added, is how USCs support students who are experiencing challenges or trauma. “We're not the end all be all. We're the bridge and we're helping you [students and families] move through whatever or wherever they need support.” This support looks different from day to day and building to building. Though not every challenge has a happy ending or ending in sight, USCs discussed walking that journey with students and being available to them. Being available to support students appeared to involve support from administration and staff, which is the third theme of this study. For example, if USCs spend most of their time indirectly supporting student, then students likely will not know who their counselor is or have a trusting relationship with them, which would limit the support they receive.

**Theme Three: Relationships with Administration and Staff**

Literature suggests that support from administration and staff help USCs better implement a comprehensive counseling program and support students and families (Clemens et al., 2009;
Fye et al., 2018). For this study, an increase or decrease in non-counseling responsibilities for
USCs appeared to be related to the level of support, both by administration and other staff within
the school. Participants shared positives and challenges when relating with staff and
administration and experiences ranged from feeling like “we get along like family” to “they
don’t value my role.” In terms of perceived positive relationships, Sarah stated, “having an
admin team that understands and trusts you is number one. I love using small groups at the
middle school…and I just need to bring it up to my team, and they're all game for it. It’s really
valuable.” Tully added,

I pretty much go to them [administration] with anything…to be supported, that's huge…I
always tell people, I can walk into my principal’s office and feel like he’s not going to
judge me…I definitely have lucked out with principals for sure because I know that's not
the case for everybody. I know if there was something I wanted to implement, then I
could walk into his office and say, hey, I think this needs to happen and as long as I bring
him evidence of what I want to do, you know, show him why I think it would be helpful,
he would be on board. There’s mutual respect. You know, I don’t always get to do
everything I want, but we can talk about it.

Part of a perceived positive relationship includes mutual trust, which can take time. Adjusting to
her new principal, Luna stated “the first year was rough.” She described her student population
as predominantly African American, with a predominantly African American administration
team, but predominantly White staff. Thus, the staff is not an equal representation to the student
population. “So I think at first, our principal had an attitude that White staff don't understand
these kids…it took time, trust, and development.”

On the other hand, Remi stated that administration “sees me as an extension of secretarial
staff. I don't know if he knows what a counselor does...and that's probably why I'm substitute teaching right now.” She goes on to say, “my biggest struggle is figuring out how to be helpful to the kids and get away from clerical tasks.” Sometimes the role isn’t valued, which is sad because we are more than schedulers.” Sarah added “you're [administration, staff] asking a person who's trained in one thing to do like several other things…some of my hardest days are days I don't even get to talk to students.” Additionally, though Tully does not personally feel undervalued in her role, she stated “I have to assess it to the fact that I have an admin team that knows what my role is. I say that, as a personal experience, as I know that others have expressed those types of frustrations” when the role is not clear. Finally, in terms of leadership, Luna described a sort of “tension” due to the level of responsibility she has. “School counselors aren’t at an admin level position, but they aren’t a teacher either. So I feel stuck in this position where you make admin level decisions sometimes, like around scheduling…but then teachers might get mad” [about the way the schedule or number of students in a class influences them].

Regarding support staff, Tully states, “we have a mental health counselor in the building now, which is so great. It's taken those emergencies off my plate a little bit.” Luna added, “in my first year we didn't have other support staff. Last year, we added a social worker, who does more intense counseling. This really helped me be able to go into classrooms and be present on a school-wide level.” This extra support has also helped with prevention efforts. “Students would be in my office every day, but now they are getting help developing coping skills. You still have emerging issues, but there's a bit more capacity for dealing with that.” Likewise, Sarah stated that her relationships with staff is “really good…whenever they need support, they reach out to me….they've always been willing and open to talk to me and bring up any concerning students.” Similarly, Tully described her relationships with staff as “they know what they're getting with
me, and I think the staff appreciates that. They realize if they need something done, they just need to tell me and I'll get it done for them.” Regarding a recent personal issue, “I look at them like family. I can't even count the number of texts that I got from all these people saying, how are you doing?” Similarly, Luna added, “staff are receptive to my needs and I am receptive to theirs…and I think there's a lot of students who seek out the counseling department, which is a good sign.” Finally, “we're friends,” Liz added when referring to her staff. She described how she can pick up the phone and call a colleague when needing support or giving support. “I sit in staff meetings, I pay attention, and then I pick up the phone or text people who I noticed are struggling.”

Along with relationships with administration and staff being influential to their role and experiences, participants explored other supports, such as training and first-hand experiences, that were helpful toward building confidence and competency to work as a USC. Thus, the fourth theme of this study includes supportive educational and experiential efforts, which includes post-training needs and desires.

**Theme Four: Supportive Educational and Experiential Efforts**

The fourth theme includes training and experiential efforts perceived to be helpful or unhelpful to supporting the USC current role. Regarding their counselor training, participants explored diverse experiences, which appeared to be attributed to the type of program they attended, how recently they attended their program, their learning style, and so on. Sarah stated, “I am confident with my skill set because of them [professors]. They always encouraged participation in associations and clubs…being involved in the community…they encouraged us to step out of our comfort zones.” Likewise, Kyle discussed that having a relationship with his professors, he was afforded opportunities like “ getting actively involved in the American School
Counseling Association” and attending conferences.

On the other hand, Tully said, “I honestly don’t know that there's anything I used that I learned in school, except for different techniques.” She continued, “you seize the moment of what's in front of you and then you move on.” Moreover, Remi stated, “the best training was my role as a 12th grade English teacher…I also worked closely with the counseling department, so I probably got more practical training from working with other counselors.” She emphasized, “there are a lot of things in theory I could use but would never actually be able to because I don't have the time or type of support in my building.” Speaking generally, Luna added, “there's a certain level you will never be prepared for. I don't know that there's any amount of training that could prepare you for what being in a school is like, just because every day is different.” She continued, “you can have this perfectly crafted plan and some days, it might work and other days, you scrap everything and start over. For me my prior experience working with teenagers prepared me more than my program did.” Finally, Liz emphasized, “a book doesn't get you there.”

Finally, in both individual interviews and the focus group, the need for post-training opportunities were mentioned. Sarah stated, “I think something we personally have trouble with [in this district] is meaningful professional development…I want to continue bettering my craft.” Both Tully and Liz agreed. Liz added that she can work through everything else (referring to themes presented in the focus group), “but what I have a hard time with is wasting seven hours on something I’m not growing from.” She goes on to suggest how it would be meaningful for counselors to be given space to share best practices and learn from one another on what works. Similarly, Tully stated that meaningful professional development could be an avenue toward giving other counselors’ confidence about what they are doing in their buildings. “Especially if
you're in a building by yourself. We have three counselors, so for us, we can bounce ideas off each other before we do something. But if you're in a building by yourself, you can't do that.” Luna agreed, saying “I'm in a building by myself, so my first year was really hard, because I was like, who do I even call? Who do I talk to?” Furthermore, collaborating with other counselors could help USCs build confidence, no matter their years of experience. For example, Sarah stated, “there are opportunities throughout each and every one of my interactions where it's been, I could have done better…I could have done it differently.” Liz added, “I think for me, it's the struggle have I done enough? Am I enough? Am I creative enough…especially in this virtual thing?” Reflecting on and sharing this self-talk with others in similar situations could prompt normalcy, growth, and development for USCs.

Understanding training and experiential opportunities that are helpful to USCs is necessary to appropriately supporting them and the unique challenges and influences they experience. As this study focused solely on schools counselors who work in an urban school district, the final theme includes USCs perspectives on urban school culture and student influences (both positive and challenging) that could affect school performance and achievement.

**Theme Five: Urban School Culture**

Literature shows there are differences between an urban school counselor role and suburban or rural role, due to culture, demographics, staff support, and other factors (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Forbes, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Lee, 2005). This section will begin with a discussion on USCs school culture and perceived differences between their role and those working in a more suburban or rural district. Then, two subthemes are explored, including Influences students experience that help or hinder their school achievement and Competency and Empathy, which centers around USCs perspectives about
understanding privilege, oppression, and systemic issues related to working in an urban school
environment.

“It is really important to have a positive climate within your school,” Sarah emphasized, “because it completely transforms the perspectives” [of students and staff]. Liz, Kyle, and Tully expressed a developed and positive culture within their schools. In terms of her school culture, Luna added it “is not super negative, but it's not positive either. And any day, it can be more negative or more positive. I think we're just tired a lot…it's exhausting and I know teachers get very burned out” due to the additional requirements (e.g., curriculum meetings) placed on staff by the state which are thought to improve student achievement. Remi described one of her schools (since she split between buildings) as laid back but missing “forward planning” [what’s next after graduation]. Her hope is to implement more of that when students return to school. She described her other school as “new.” “The school administrator is new, along with most of the staff.” She stated “there are not clear expectations…so there's just not a good jelled culture. And I think that's hard for the students because they don't know what they're supposed to be doing.”

Staff turnover was discussed as a large influence to school culture. Remi added, “there's a big staff turnover right now and we haven't been able to be together to be cohesive” [due to COVID]. Similarly, Luna mentioned “if you're changing half the teaching staff year after year, it's really hard to establish a culture that is consistent.”

Except for this year, we've had a very large turnover of teachers, which affects a lot of things. A teacher who's never been in a school before, they don't have a lot of diversity in their perspective or teaching methods…I'm doing broad generalizations here, but a lot of new staff are young white women. And they may not have done a lot of work on their privilege, assumptions, or biases. So it feels a lot of times, like playing catch up that this
is what a highly traumatized youth reacts like. And this is what students from this background may react like, but you still have to hold them to high standards and know they're capable. They're still capable, they just might need a little extra encouragement. Likewise, Sarah stated, “we're an expanding program, we've been pushing through new teachers every year. So, you know, it's kind of hard for first or second-year teachers to really develop and learn how to teach a completely new concept.” In terms of consistency, Tully added that her first three years as a school counselor, she was in three different buildings. “A new building every year…how do you expect me to build relationships with kids where I can make a difference if I'm not always here?” Furthermore, now that she has become more established and at the same school for a while, she shared her unique perspective of how her school culture has evolved over the years.

COVID aside this year, the atmosphere and culture is so different now than it was seven years ago when I started. Even with the college stuff and things we've been able to implement. The kids being able to voice questions, like why do I need that or how is that going to help me? The numbers rise…the graduation rate has gone up and we're close to 90%, which is great to see. Ten years ago there was no stability, I mean, you would come to school, and you would never have the same teachers, you know, every year would be different. And even with me, my first three years were in three different buildings. So I think that has created a core group of people that have been here for at least 10 years…the kids see and feel that.

When discussing perceived differences between working in an urban or suburban school setting, Sarah quickly said compensation. “The first thing that pops up is pay. It’s a weird thought though…that we would have to leave this huge district to progress in that way. And the
district knows it…because of how much counselor turnover there is here.” She went on to say, “I feel like so many counselors are like let's deal with it. But it shouldn't be something we deal with…but because the profession isn't valued as it should be, we're kind of just stuck with that.” Additionally, in terms of counseling support, Tully added, “I think a suburban district, because of funding, has the ability to provide more counselors than we do.” [In urban districts] “we're used in different capacities and not to our fullest ability…you just are not given the opportunity.”

Sarah reflected, “it’s about who has access, is available, and willing to go to certain spaces.” It seems your suburban and rural areas, you have older, more established staff…and more funding for what they’re [students] able to have.” Furthermore, in terms of opportunities, Tully reflected on how urban students see what they have and what they do not in terms of athletic and educational opportunities compared to other, more affluent districts. “It’s not that they [urban students] don't get access to opportunities, because they do…it’s that our kids don't get opportunities to excel.” She continued, “our kids see those discrepancies regarding athletics [facilities], number of classes we can offer, size of our classes, or look of our buildings.” That said, when comparing her high school experience (urban school) with her fiancé’s (rural school), she stated “urban schools can also have more opportunities and partnerships…being able to expose [students] to different things and communities around them” than a small rural district.

Finally, Luna added, “no matter what school you work in, there's always going to be students who are high risk… students with trauma. But I think in a suburban area, cases may be presented differently.” For example, when students were given the opportunity to ask questions about college, they asked “how do I eat? Where does my food come from?” Though part of that limited understanding could be because students were in middle school, “I think part of it also was because most of them don't know anybody who has been to college.” Part of understanding
urban school culture is being able to identify and recognize forces students deal with, whether that be staff turnover, issues at home, or trauma. Understanding these influences allow USCs to be better equipped to support students.

**Subtheme (5.1): Influences**

When talking about urban culture, participants reflected upon various influences students may encounter that either bolster or hinder school achievement or motivation toward schoolwork. Throughout the interviews and focus group, participants appeared to take their role very seriously, especially when reflecting on how they support and advocate for the wellbeing of students. For example, when providing services for students that support academic and mental health, Liz stated, “if we don't take our job seriously, every day, these children could continue living like they are living” [in poverty, with limited access or resources]. Participants emphasized that positive influences included relationships and connections between students and staff, students’ resiliency, and tangible things (e.g., fresh paint on walls) that foster school pride. As far as challenges, participants discussed organizational politics and state requirements, level of support, and external issues, such as at home or in students’ environments.

In terms of relationships and providing resources to support students, Sarah stated, “connections at school support students so much, because I can't, as much as I'd love to, help everybody's home life and make sure they are supported in every aspect.” She continued, “instead, we're tag teaming...if you have connections in school, you have students who want to do well, and then who have teachers and staff in place that are there ready for them to do well.” Likewise, Luna added that her school team focuses on removing barriers to support students more fully. Having consistent support from everyone in the school community is important to supporting students from all angles (e.g., in the classroom, extracurriculars, and so on). To add,
Remi stated “relationships students have with staff members, whoever they connect with, their people who are cheering them on and looking out for them…that's what keeps students coming back.”

Exploring school pride, Tully reflected on recent changes to her building and staff, including getting a new football coach and other updates. “It’s just those tangible, physical things that make a difference.” After watching their first football game with a new coach, “I wanted to cry seeing 40 kids on the sideline. Being able to have a true football team where they're not playing both sides of the ball because there's no other option…and the kids are excited about being there.” She added that they got new uniforms and a donation from an NFL player for all of them to have the exact same shoes. “So now their shoes match. They didn't win every game but broke a large losing streak.” Furthermore, in describing new updates in her building, “our gym floor is incredible, they just painted my office. So the kids were really excited about coming back. We can have pride in our school again.”

In terms of resiliency as a positive influence for student achievement, Remi stated “it's fun to see that resiliency when you have a kid that came to you with credit deficits and the light bulb goes on.” Tully added “there are kids who rise above it [their situations] and they come to school. That being said, there's a lot on the other end too.” To speak to the other end, Sarah explored trends of students getting frustrated and giving up because they're not understanding their schoolwork.

If you don't have the skill set to know you need a break, walk away, or reframe [the situation] then you're not going to do it. And that's completely understandable. Like, you're not going to want to come back to do something that frustrates you, that makes you upset, and makes you sad. And, you [some staff members] think like, oh, the student
just doesn't want to do it. But it's more than that...it's so much more than just refusing to do it. Feelings are involved...perhaps trauma or being skipped over and ignored in elementary school.

Furthermore, Tully described advocating for students despite certain school or district politics. “There's so much emphasis on achievement that I think kids fall through the cracks because achievement is put ahead of a lot of other stuff.” She went on to say,

I understand the state wants to make sure we're doing what we're supposed to be doing, but a lot of times we're not servicing students’ hierarchy of needs correctly. You know, how can you expect Joe to come into school today when Mom and Dad aren’t even there or there's this constant worry that somebody's going to be deported. Or, there is abuse or no food in the house...there's just so many things that our kids are challenged with. And I understand that one kid might be causing 29 other kids to not perform well in a class, but what are we doing to service that one kid? What have we done? Has anybody had a conversation as to why they are acting like this? Do we know what's going on? Is there trauma that has never been addressed? Does this kid just need some attention?

Sarah added, “you're going to have restrictions...data matters and expectations are high, but there isn't a lot of support” in some urban schools. For example, “you are given free range, but free range is like a fenced in yard...you’re not told exactly what your limits are, so it's like walking in the dark until you hit a wall...you have to be adaptable.” Moreover, Remi mentioned that her biggest frustration “when it comes down from above” is being assigned tasks that do not align with students’ needs.

Regarding access to support, Kyle stated, “in a perfect world, every kid would have a school counselor, a social worker, a community member... a corporation that's ready to bring
them on board. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way all the time.” Luna added, “I'm the only school counselor in our building, whereas you know, there are some middle schools that have like two or three counselors, which makes a difference.” Furthermore, Sarah stated “we don't have any counselors in the elementary and we definitely need them. You have students in middle school who are struggling and it's hard to break those habits at that point, because they've developed them throughout elementary.” Finally, Luna discussed challenges to getting to school. “Students don’t get a bus unless they live over a mile and a half from the school. So when it snows or is super cold or rainy…or if their electricity gets shut off that creates more problems.”

When reflecting on external influences, “one of the biggest influences,” Tully stated, “is what's happening at home…you have students who worry about being deported…or their rent went up, so they have to move. The outside world has such an impact on what's happening here in the building.” She continued by saying, “tracking students can be challenging because they’re so in and out, you know, like, you're here for one year, and then you're gone…the staff is trying to figure out where kids went.” In terms of caregiver involvement, Tully stated “I might run into a parent here or there if there's an issue, but not often.” Similarly, Luna added “I think my interactions with parents have been positive, but overall, we have very low parent engagement in the school.” “A lot of them [students] are from a split household or are working themselves or have a parent working two jobs,” described Kyle. Supporting students’ extracurriculars requires “parents to pick up their student,” Luna stated, “but what if they work second shift or need their middle schooler to come home and watch their two-year old brother?” She went on to say, “it all boils back down to access. I don't think it's a motivation issue” [on the part of parents or students]. Likewise, Sarah and Liz discussed that parents who are busy working to support the family may have no other choice than to work multiple jobs or shifts that may influence students’
ability to engage in school or extracurriculars. Liz clarified, “not that it's not loving, they [students] just don't have that support.” Sarah emphasized, “I don't think any student wants to fail, but along the way they have been shown that’s just it, you know, that's their limit. It's hard.”

In terms of encouraging parent engagement, Sarah stated, “you have to be present for the student and family. Even if they're not getting back in contact with you, be available for them to reach out.” She continued, “It's hard when we walk away from a conversation or don’t get responses from parents. We might think, oh, they don't care or it's not working. But they are listening. We just have to be consistent and available.” She also emphasized being present and responsive to everybody, not just those who appear to be struggling.

Speaking from personal experience, I was that student who did so well the teachers didn't have to deal with me. But lo and behold, here I am dealing with my mom being switched to night shift…me having to pick up a lot of the housework…making sure my brother and sister were doing fine…dealing with foreclosures and moving. You would never have known because I was doing so well and because of that, no one came to check on me.

Thus, understanding various influences students may experience and ramifications of those influences, whether presented overtly or not, emphasizes the need for USCs to be available and trustworthy from the perspective of students. To develop these relationships, all participants stressed the importance of being multiculturally competent and empathetic, which is the second and final subtheme under urban culture.

Subtheme (5.2): Competency and Empathy

Being competent and empathetic regarding students’ worldviews and experiences align with existing literature that urges USCs to recognize their biases, view students within their
family and community contexts, understand how culture and discrimination can influence students’ learning and well-being, and advocate and respond to students’ diverse needs (ASCA, 2017, 2019a; Bidell, 2012; Cole & Grothaus, 2014; Hayden et al., 2016; Lapan et al., 2014; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013; Mitcham et al., 2009; Wingfield et al., 2010). Thus, being multiculturally competent and empathetic appeared to be essential components for successfully carrying out the USC role and developing relationships with students.

Kyle shared that it is necessary to “immerse yourself in diversity…and accept other people's beliefs who differ from your own” when living and working in an urban setting. “You need to have an open mind about the environment you’re in, especially if it is different than the one you grew up in.” In terms of having an open mind, Sarah discussed that “there are different experiences and thoughts from children. You're going to have diverse traumas, races, experiences and you can't have the assumption that all is going to be the same. It doesn't work that way.” In terms of potential assumptions about urban districts, Sarah added, “I think one assumption of urban schools is that you have all these low-income students and families. But it's like, no, you have a variety of students, a variety of experiences.” Luna and other participants emphasized that there are many situations students have no control over, thus empathy for students is necessary. As it is impossible for USCs to recognize and understand a student’s experiences and needs all the time, Sarah emphasized “your savior complex isn't necessary, but your genuine attitude is.” This genuine attitude helps build an empathetic relationship that students can trust and feel safe even when sharing experiences the USC may not have gone through or completely understand.

In terms of how to approach students, Liz stated, “conversations she has with students is “not that you are failing? It’s how can I help you? We got to figure out how to get out of it.”
Luna added that her school is beginning to focus more on trauma informed methods (principal is an advocate), which is needed “because there's maybe only a handful of students in our school that do not have significant trauma histories.” She went on to say,

a student who has been highly traumatized might be more highly reactive, they may take longer to process things, they may, you know, need a few extra steps or a little extra care in guiding them to what you want them to do. I think a lot of our teachers now are starting to understand that when you're working with highly traumatized youth, you have to take a different approach…not just, I gave you the assignment, you just need to do it…

So I think that's been a huge help…learning you might have to change how you do things a little bit, and it's not going be perfect, but keep trying and don't give up on it.

Regarding staff, Kyle stated “we have a good group of teachers. I wish there was more diversity from their perspective for having such a diverse [student] population. We [staff] don't have the same demographics as our students…we need more educators that look like our students.” He continued, “there’s a lot of pushback from staff that students lack motivation. But it’s more than that. Why should I [student] put effort into understanding them [teacher] if they’re not trying to understand me?” Likewise, Tully described how disconnection between staff and students could be “due to the lack of understanding.” She continued, “I think on a whole staff are not aware of their own biases, assumptions and privileges.” Finally, Sarah, a Hispanic counselor, stated the teachers in her building are mostly female and White. “We know representation matters…I have students who come and unload this…maybe not racial tension, but they are definitely feeling something. It’s not a knock on these teachers because I think they're amazing, but I don't think there's much diversity.”
Tully, a White woman, explored the importance of understanding privilege. “You have to recognize your White privilege…acknowledging that you have assumptions and beliefs that might get torn down [challenged] real hard and quick, and being okay with that, and being able to say, I was wrong, and admitting that.” She reflected on times her principal would say “stop and take your White glasses off and see this from our parents point of view.” She explained how that interaction was meaningful to her and how those attitudes, both culturally competent and not, affect students. Liz added “once you realize all kids can learn and drop your personal biases, it levels the playing field” in terms of seeing potential of students, whether in an urban, suburban, or rural district. She further discussed how her staff is working on becoming more aware of biases, assumptions, privileges. “We all get in our own path and it's hard to veer off the path of what we've always done. I'm very proud of our admin team for seeing that this is something that's affecting our kids.” She went on to describe how she has been working with a teacher regarding his understanding. The teacher had the attitude that students are supposed to be in school at their desk until three o'clock. Liz challenged the teacher by asking questions like, “What if this kid goes to work?” She asks teachers to put themselves in students’ shoes. “They're not choosing to not do homework. They're just having to make a choice.” She continued by saying, “especially during COVID, you know, when we're working with low-income families where everybody's working minimum wage jobs, and parents have lost their jobs or someone goes on a two-week unpaid leave. You have to help them [staff] understand.” Understanding a student’s worldview, influences, and experiences could change their entire educational experience. Thus, for students and families to feel heard and noticed, USCs must be competent and empathetic to the diversity of students and issues they encounter. They also must encourage competency among their staff and school community-at-large.
Summary of Themes

Themes and subthemes of this study centered around not only understanding the USC role, but how USCs interpret and make meaning of their experiences, while considering the unique interaction of influences they experience. Phenomenological data gathered from participants yielded five major themes and six subthemes, which centered around counselor responsibilities, USC connections, support for the counselor role, and urban school culture. USCs were encouraged to share authentic feelings, perceptions, challenges, successes, competencies, and experiences that stimulate meaning in their lives. Participants appeared engaged and genuinely appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences with me and also other USCs in the focus group. Though the USC role is active, challenging, and ever-changing, all participants appeared thoroughly engaged in helping the diverse needs of students and further developing their skills to help their students and school climate in which they work. Additionally, their actions, passion, and pride for supporting students seemed to satisfy a calling or purpose in their lives, which tapped into their dedication and commitment to serving students.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of how USCs experience and make sense of their role. As location matters for understanding school counselors’ experiences, this study focused on a single urban district. Though context is important to acknowledge, the role of school counselors working in urban schools has largely been overlooked (Dye, 2014; Lee, 2005; Mitcham et al., 2009) and there has been limited qualitative research on USCs actual activities and experiences in schools (Dye, 2014). Thus, to fill this gap in the literature and gain deeper insight into how USCs experience and interpret their role, this study utilized semi-structured interviews and a focus group. The data was analyzed and coded for themes and patterns, and richly described in a way that augmented prior research. In regard to further understanding USC experiences, this chapter will discuss the findings of data analysis, limitations of the study, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Findings of Data Analysis

The findings of this phenomenological study are reviewed in relation to the research questions. Five themes and six subthemes emerged from the data: (1) USC Activities: Fusion of Knowledge, Variability, and Affect: (1.1) Differentiators for How USCs Adapt, (1.2) COVID-19, (1.3) Purposefulness; (2) Building Relationships and Providing Support: (2.1) Trauma and Challenges; (3) Relationships with Administration and Staff; (4) Experiential and Educational Support; (5) Urban School Culture: (5.1) Influences, (5.2) Competency and Empathy. Themes and subthemes centered around four categories, including counselor responsibilities, relationships, support for the role, and culture. Along with elaborating on concepts already seen in the literature (e.g., supportive relationships, and training efforts), this study captured USCs
feelings, thoughts, and perceived meaning of their role, going beyond simply identifying what it is USCs do throughout a day. Offering USCs an opportunity to share real experiences, stories, and perceptions was essential to this study and provided insight into the complexity and diverse influences. Greater understanding into the lived experiences and affective states of USCs, how they make decisions, prioritize responsibilities, serve students, understand their role, and manage challenges has the potential to extend general instructional efforts to include more targeted training and supervision opportunities for USCs (Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

Research Question 1

The first research question of this study was: What are the lived experiences of urban school counselors? This question aimed to increase understanding of the role, while considering how contextual influences, personal attributes, affect, knowledge, level of support and relationships, role design (variability, structure), training, and years of experience interact with one another. Understanding the interaction of these factors was believed to prompt a more inclusive picture and holistic interpretation of the intricacies USCs experience.

Congruent with the literature, participants described their role as complex with many moving parts (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Forbes, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Lee, 2005). USCs work within a system that offers various job roles, personalities, challenges, systemic issues, and needs. Participants explored filling in the gaps and supporting students in whatever ways were needed, which included finding housing for families, tapping into students’ motivation and goals, advocating on behalf of students, challenging biases of self and staff members, and so on. USCs communicated dedication to their role and shared meaningful stories of how they have supported students. Sometimes support looked like walking around the school with a student to allow them time to process their feelings or calm down.
Other times support was exhibited by changing a student’s pronouns in the system, so staff would address the student correctly. Sometimes support included understanding current political and racial tensions that influence how students feel supported and accepted in their communities, schools. USCs lit up when talking about working with students directly and being able to be available to provide for their needs. They often reflected feeling they “could have done more.” Though this feeling may be common in the helping professions, I wonder if part of it is due to the diverse tasks, influences, tensions, and needs USCs complete daily, many times simultaneously.

Though all USCs appeared to understand the purpose of their role (per ASCA), how to best support students, and meet expectations (e.g., develop a comprehensive counseling program), they explored challenges that often limit their capacity to carry out their “desired” role or role they believe to be most supportive to students. Challenges often included non-counseling tasks (e.g., testing, scheduling), perceived relationships with administration and staff, and logistics of the role, such as splitting time and energy between schools or serving a large student caseload as the only school counselor. For instance, Tully shared that when she is focused on scheduling, she feels she does not have time to meet with students or becomes irritated when distracted or interrupted. Similarly, Sarah and Remi explored difficulties associated with splitting their time between schools, emphasizing they cannot consistently support students’ needs when they are not always in the same building. Finally, working relationships with administration and staff members appeared influential to how USCs could effectively perform their role. Building rapport, gaining trust, having patience, and being honest and transparent appeared to be cornerstones of how USCs develop and maintain relationships. Perceived strong relationships not only seemed to increase USCs job satisfaction, but also their ability to perform duties they felt
were important. Furthermore, to provide quality support to students, USC's emphasized it is critical to understand urban culture and various influences students may experience. This understanding includes counselors and staff reflecting on their own biases and privilege, challenging one another’s biases, understanding opportunities and challenges students experience, and effectively advocating for change in order to better serve the diverse needs of students and families.

Woven throughout this study and explored within various contexts were USC’s feelings and perceptions (e.g., excited to make a difference, stressed during specific times of the school year). This understanding is helpful as counselors’ affective states may influence their lived experiences and ability to support students. These feelings seemed to bounce around and change when discussing different activities or responsibilities. For example, though USC’s exuded happiness and pride when reflecting on stories about success (e.g., helping a student graduate, connecting students to resources), they shared feelings of stress or tension when considering non-counseling tasks, splitting their time between schools, working with trauma or challenges, and reflecting on perceived poor relationships with staff or administration. Understanding how USC’s set boundaries, think about, or react to their activities, whether positive or challenging, offers insight into how to better support them in their role, including their wellness and job satisfaction. Interestingly, though USC’s feelings fluctuated, all participants consistently emphasized their role fulfills a sort of calling or purpose in their lives, which is further explored under question two.

Finally, this study added to the literature about the importance of educational and training opportunities for USC’s (Martinez, Dye, & Gonzalez, 2017; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Key supports for USC’s included mentorship they received from professors and experiential opportunities they
participated in (e.g., internship, on-the-job training, related work experiences). As the internship experience is the first professional experience for a school counselor, this study demonstrated the importance of quality internship placements and quality mentorship opportunities. Having a good internship or work experience appeared to help USC’s feel more confident and experienced in their role. Specifically, professional experience in an urban environment, working with children and adolescents, and recognizing forms of oppression and systemic racism appeared helpful to increasing USC’s self-efficacy and ability to support students more thoughtfully. Furthermore, USC’s shared the importance of adopting a growth mindset, “constantly bettering yourself and role as time goes on.” This perspective encourages a continuous effort toward learning and adapting to meet the needs of students, the state, and district. This mindset also supports USC’s ability to pivot or adjust in times of crisis or transition (e.g., COVID-19, school violence, suicide). Though training efforts appeared influential to USC’s development, they also discussed the importance of learning over time. Each school is different with different needs, so learning the system and how to best form relationships and ways to reach students appeared essential to their development. Moreover, as USC’s are often faced with diverse student needs, participants desired post-training opportunities and meaningful professional development related to their “real” role and current issues they experience in their buildings (e.g., trauma-informed practices). They also explored wanting time to collaborate with one another, learning and growing from each other’s’ experiences.

Thus, when considering training efforts for USC’s, school counselors may not need more general training, but rather targeted understanding about organizational culture, urban culture and racial identity development, productive advocacy efforts, and ways to build working relationships with administration. Literature on job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)
might also be useful. Job crafting recommends employees craft their jobs by “changing cognitive, task, and/or relational boundaries to shape interactions and relationships with others at work” (p. 1). This could allow USCs, administrators, educators, and supervisors to craft the role in a way that promotes efficient and effective support for students, while realistically considering the given system, funding issues, and challenges. This recognition may help remove tension between role versus non-role or ideal versus realistic role.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question of this study was: What does it mean to be an urban school counselor? This research question aimed to understand what being an USC meant to participants and how that might influence their lived experiences. When reflecting on meaning, USCs discussed being adaptable, flexible, and following a sort of calling in their lives. Thus, this question added to the literature by going beyond understanding what USCs do to learning how they experience their role and what it means to them.

USCs giggled when asked questions about how they prioritize or make decisions during their day. They described it is necessary to be adaptable in their role because their “activities change from day to day” and their role “consists of a little bit of everything.” Thus, there does not seem to be a certain way USCs support or serve as a resource to students, staff, and families. Instead, participants stated they “fill the gaps” and are “whatever students need.” Understanding that their responsibilities may not fit into a presumed box and, to best support student and families, they must adapt, grow, and think innovatively when faced with challenges, resistance, and systemic issues appeared essential to being an effective USC. In terms of being adaptable and flexible, participants shared how transitioning to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic required flexibility. In order to continue providing resources and access to students,
USCs reflected on both challenges and opportunities that emerged during this time. On one hand, USCs explored difficulties connecting with students online and identifying and providing crisis intervention and support. On the other hand, USCs described this time as an opportunity to “rebrand” their role and spend time organizing a more comprehensive counseling program, as interruptions and non-counseling tasks were limited. Furthermore, though COVID-19 has forced USCs to adjust, participants emphasized they are constantly adjusting in their role, whether it be managing emerging issues, learning a new role (e.g., moving to another building), or working with a new principal or staff. Thus, the ability to adjust and be flexible was discussed by all participants as a necessary component. That said, how USCs adjust seemed to vary by years of experience, personality, temperament, and level of support in their buildings and communities. For example, a USC who has positive rapport with administration may be able to adjust or adapt differently than a USC who does not perceive a strong relationship with their principal.

Along with adaptability, personal attributes and experience appeared to shape how USC interpret meaning of their experiences. Participants emphasized it takes time and patience to “grow into the role” and “learn the role”, including building confidence and knowledge about what ASCA calls USCs to do and how that parallels what their district and administration ask them to do. For example, someone who is flexible or laid-back might feel less stress when emerging issues arise than someone who likes to keep a tight schedule of their activities. Thus, understanding how USCs approach their role and interpret what is happening allows greater understanding into how they might react to what is going on around them, perform their responsibilities, and provide services to those in the school community. Additionally, years of experience appeared to support USCs efforts. For a USC who has been working for a while might better understand what they can let go or how to navigate emerging issues and other
expectations more smoothly than someone still learning their role. Though learning and developing into the role occurs for new professionals, all participants (experience ranging between 1.5 to 26 years) discussed the need to learn, relearn, or adjust at different times. For instance, Remi who had nine years of experience, recently was moved to another school and now splits her time. Though she is still in the same district, her system, supports, and responsibilities have changed. So, even though she has years of experience that can help with this transition, she may feel more unsettled than someone two years into a consistent role. Furthermore, all participants reflected on how they have adjusted to providing services to students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognizing how personal attributes, ability to adapt, years of experience, and other factors (level of support) influence USCs is fundamental to understanding their lived experiences. Understanding only one of these areas is not sufficient. For example, Tully appeared calmer and able to “let things go”, whereas Sarah appeared a bit more unsettled and anxious. At first glance, years of experience differed between these USCs, which might imply the longer you are a USC the more settled you become. However, as this study sought to understand USCs lived experiences and how they interpret meaning of their role, it is important to recognize that Sarah’s role recently changed, so she is now split between two buildings, which has changed her role dramatically. Thus, understanding personal attributes, while also acknowledging the system in which they work and other potential logistical challenges is important when supporting USCs.

Finally, though USCs’ affective states fluctuated, all participants described their role as following a sense of purpose or calling. There were tears, happiness, pride when USCs explored what being a USC means to them. Comments included “it’s why I'm doing this” (Sarah), “this is where I should be and what I should be doing” (Kyle), and it means “the world” (Liz). All USCs
shared stories about why they decided to become a school counselor, which involved reflecting on their past experiences and passion for supporting students and families. Furthermore, though participants felt they were fulfilling a calling or purpose, which appeared consistent regardless of the day-to-day challenges they experienced, it seemed clear their satisfaction and ability to perform their role increased positively when they felt connected to students, administration, and those in the school community-at-large. Thus, because USCs feel less supported and able to perform their role effectively when they experience perceived weak working relationships with students and administration, understanding how to build rapport and trust within a given system, amongst the challenges and opportunities, becomes a focal point when supporting USC needs and ability to navigate their organization successfully.

**Review of Findings**

The findings of this phenomenological study align with existing literature and also satisfy a research gap. Though findings extended prior research, they also added depth and knowledge to understanding the lived experiences of USC and what being a USC means to them, which goes beyond simply recognizing what they do to learning how they experience and relate to their role. Thus, this study highlighted influential factors to USC lived experiences, such as their feelings and personal attributes. Greater understanding into how influences interact, allow better support, training, and opportunities for USC to develop, learn, and grow into their role. Ultimately, an increase in USC’s confidence and competence encourages improved and more mindful services for students, families, and system at-large. A summary of the findings and how they aligned and contributed to the research is shown in Table 4.
### Table 4

**Summary of Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Addressed in Prior Research</th>
<th>Added Depth to Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselor Role/Activities</td>
<td>ASCA, 2019a, 2019b; Chandler et al., 2018; DeKruyf et al., 2013; Dollarhide &amp; Miller, 2006; Epstein &amp; Van Voorhis, 2010; Forbes, 2010; Lapan et al., 2014; Studer, 2005</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships with Students and Staff</td>
<td>Bemak &amp; Chung, 2005; Bidell, 2012; Clemens et al., 2009; Cole &amp; Grothaus, 2014; Fye et al., 2018; Hayden et al., 2015; Henderson, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Lapan et al., 2014; Lee, 2005; Lloyd-Hazlett &amp; Foster, 2013; Martinez et al., 2017; Mitcham et al., 2009; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Williams et al., 2016; Wingfield et al., 2010</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with Trauma</td>
<td>Martinez et al., 2020; NCTSN, 2020; Rumsey &amp; Milsom, 2019</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and Support</td>
<td>ASCA, 2017; ASCA, 2019a, 2019b; Constantine, 2002; Cook et al., 2015; Holcomb &amp; Mitchell, 2005; Paisley et al., 2006; Studer, 2005</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Training Needs</td>
<td>Henderson, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy &amp; Mitchell, 2005; Owens et al., 2009</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adapting to COVID-19</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Attributes and How USCs Adapt</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Differences Between Urban/Suburban Role</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competency and Empathy</td>
<td>ASCA, 2017, 2019a; Bidell, 2012; Cole &amp; Grothaus, 2014; Hayden et al., 2016; Lapan et al., 2014; Lloyd-Hazlett &amp; Foster, 2013; Mitcham et al., 2009; Wingfield et al., 2010</td>
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Findings of this study increased understanding into USCs activities, relationships with students and staff, supportive training and experiential opportunities, understanding of urban
culture and influences, and working competently with students in an urban district. In terms of USC's activities, the role is multifaceted, complex, and lively, so it is not enough to understand one part or activity without considering influences or other parts of the role. Thus, this study added depth and an appreciation for the role by considering the interaction of contextual influences, personal characteristics and feelings, relationships, role design (variability, structure), education, and years of experience to the responsibilities and tasks USC's complete. For example, prior research explored variability of the USC role, in terms of adding in non-counseling tasks; however, this study added depth by exploring how personal attributes, years of experience, level of support in their buildings, and so on affect how they are able to adapt successfully or unsuccessfully.

Part of performing the USC role effectively and efficiently included having positive working relationships and positive training experiences. Building relationships with students takes time, patience, and active presence on behalf of the USC. Relationships with staff and administration also require learning how to work together to support students and perhaps job craft (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) what the role will look like, as every school has different needs and level of support. Findings suggest USC's experiences varied dramatically due to perceived support in their schools, such as whether or not they were the only counselor in their buildings or their relationships with administration. Thus, understanding the context of the USC role is essential to understanding their experiences and ability to perform their role. In terms of training school, participants mentioned positive learning experiences included their relationships with professors and opportunities to become involved in associations, such as ASCA. On the other hand, some emphasized that on-the-job training, working with other counselors, and experiential opportunities were more supportive to their growth and development. That said, all
participants discussed the need for relevant and targeted post-training, perhaps in the form of required professional development throughout the school year, that speaks to their needs and allows them opportunities to learn from one another.

Finally, participants discussed that understanding urban culture and influences are essential to effectively working in an urban district. Part of this understanding includes recognizing issues of privilege, oppression, and challenges and opportunities within their environment. Also, recognizing and challenging personal biases, biases of staff and administrators, and systemic issues within the school are necessary to create a supportive and safe culture for all students to learn and grow in. Not only is understanding important but being able to actively advocate and promote change important to the wellbeing and educational experiences of students.

Furthermore, this study aimed to bring life to USCs interpretive experiences; thus, highlighting their feelings, emotional responses, choices, apparent sense of meaning and purpose, and influential factors like personal attributes and ways of adapting.

Limitations

All research studies have limitations, including the present study. The first limitation relates to the findings being from one district. Though qualitative research does not assert generalizability and homogeneity is important to phenomenological research, USCs in other urban districts may share different views and experiences. Additionally, though participants worked within the same district, there were differences among them. For example, USCs worked at both middle and high schools, with varying levels of support (relationship with principal, number of counselors in building) and years of experience (1.5 years of experience versus 26). While this study aimed to capture some of those differences, research that further considers these factors and how they add to the diverse perspectives and interpretations of USCs would be useful.
to better understanding overall experiences. Furthermore, as this particular district does not employ elementary counselors, those voices are not included. This lack of inclusion further highlights the overall lack of school counselors at the elementary level. That said, because research is limited on the experiences of USCs, the findings of this study are believed to promote a deepened understanding. The second limitation includes data collection methods. Due to COVID-19, interviews and the focus group were conducted virtually. Though, I believe rapport was built with participants and conversations aligned with the purpose of the study, I had hoped to collect data in person and also utilize observations within participants’ environments. This would have added increased understanding about the complexity of participants’ experiences. Finally, the third limitation relates to the demographics of the sample. The participants were predominately White, with only one participant identifying as Hispanic. For a future study, it would be important to see what a more diverse participant sample would say and if that would differ from the current sample. That said, efforts were taken to mitigate these limitations.

Limitations of this study were eased by utilizing IPA and methods of trustworthiness to increase reliability of the study’s findings. Direct quotes from participants were used plentifully to create rich, thick description, allowing readers to hear genuine USC voices. Methodological triangulation and member checks allowed USCs experiences to be investigated through interviews and a focus group. Multiple collection methods allowed for deeper understanding of the experiences of all participants, in various contexts. In terms of member checking, I paraphrased responses and asked for clarification during interviews and the focus group when needed, which allowed participants the opportunity to confirm or clarify their responses. Additionally, during the focus group, I shared two PowerPoint slides with themes (see Appendix F), yielded from interviews, in order to confirm or correct understanding and interpretation,
which helped decolonize the research. Finally, IPA recognizes that the findings of this study are a result of my interpretation of participants’ interpretations of their experiences. Though true, I took part in reflexivity and bridling exercises to remain aware of my assumptions and experiences throughout the data collection and analysis process. This awareness increased reflection and thoughtfulness of how my identity and interpretation could influence the study, creating more space and openness for participants’ experiences and interpretations.

**Implications**

Findings yielded from this study have implications for USCs, school and district personnel, and counselor educators and school counselors-in-training.

**Urban School Counselors**

This study provided the unique opportunity for USCs to come together. As the role is busy and active, participants typically are not afforded the time to collaborate together and listen to one another. As stated from three of the participants, this is especially difficult if someone is the only counselor in their building. Thus, this opportunity provided space for USCs to talk, bounce ideas around, and feel connected to others with similar experiences. Furthermore, the focus group provided opportunities where counselors were able to ask questions and share thoughts with their peers. This prompted a discussion about the importance of USCs having time to share successes, challenges, questions, and so on throughout the school year.

Part of USCs collaborating together includes recognizing how experiences, personal attributes, level of support, and role design influence the role. This recognition might prompt USCs to seek out further training, become more mindful of potential stressors and burnout, work to increase their advocacy efforts and supports, or simply provide a space to normalize feelings around challenges. Without thoughtfully recognizing and considering these influences and
affective states, USCs are less likely to be active in their own professional and personal well-being and development. Instead, they may get caught in a cycle that leads to isolation, burnout, stress, and exhaustion (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Kim & Lambie, 2018; Lee, 2005). Furthermore, collaborating together increases supportive services. Though a counselor might be the only support staff in their school, partnering with community organizations to offer additional services may help increase supports for students. For example, if a USC notices a need to implement a grief group, they could partner with a local organization who offers these services. Being intentional about partnering with others, building relationships, mindfully recognizing their own wellbeing, and seeking out supportive training opportunities can help promote longevity in their role, thoughtfulness in their activities, innovation efforts, and increase USCs level of services and support they provide in their school communities.

**School Staff and Administration**

USCs work in a system with school staff, administrators, and district personnel. Thus, it is important for leaders and staff to understand how USCs’ services, time, and skills can best be utilized to support students and families. Though the ASCA National Model gives guidance to best practices for USCs, building staff and administration may not be familiar with those standards. Thus, understanding USCs feelings, perceptions, and experiences can create a more supportive culture, which might prevent burnout and increase job satisfaction for USCs. Furthermore, as partnerships are important to supporting students, it may be beneficial for graduate programs, community agencies, and school district personnel to come together to more fully understand how to best utilize a USC role when supporting students. This could include advocating for elementary schools to have counselors, which is a rarity in urban schools. It could also include hiring a registrar to do the scheduling work. Instead of district leaders having the
mindset that USC’s “fill the gaps”, they could better understand how USC's’ skill set and mental health training can provide prevention efforts for students, increase mental health services students receive, promote trauma-informed services, deliver resources to combat challenges (e.g., food, housing), create a positive culture for all students, and challenge systemic issues within their educational systems. Considering the potential of USC's, while recognizing challenges they experience, allows for more thoughtful support for them.

Counselor Educators and School Counselors-in-Training

This study highlighted the importance of proper training and experience. Understanding the role when training future USC’s is important. General school counselor training is not sufficient for the complexities of working in an urban environment. Proper training should include exposing counselors-in-training to diverse ways of thinking, living, and contexts; increasing familiarity of urban environments by perhaps shadowing an urban school counselor. Counselors-in-training should be able to not only understand inequities students experience, but be able to talk about them and advocate on students behalf. As leaders in the building, school counselors must be able to encourage teachers and staff to select curriculum and reading materials that include students’ experiences and history, and discuss current events to show understanding. School counselors must also be able to encourage a climate where students feel empowered to share their lived experiences. To competently and confidently serve diverse students, counselors-in-training must spend time learning about their own racial identity, assumptions they have, and commit to furthering their development in ways that best support the needs of their students.

School counselors who do not receive adequate training may not feel confident in their abilities to effectively support students. They may not have spent time examining their biases, privileges, and how their past experiences influence the families and students they work with.
They may not feel poised in their ability to lead, advocate, and challenge systemic issues. They also may not understand how to successfully work within an organization, which is critical to successfully serving as a USC. School counselors are part of a system, so building relationships, working together, partnering with community members, advocating on behalf of students, and doing these things simultaneously many times is part of the role. Thus, understanding how to navigate both the role and school system is necessary to building self-efficacy, rapport with others, and ability to affect real and positive change for students.

Regarding counselor training, participants explored diverse experiences and preferences, which appeared to be attributed to the type of program they attended, how recently they attended their program, and their learning style. USCs discussed on-the-job training (e.g., internship experience), other work-related experience with students (e.g., teacher, working with teens), and time spent with other school counselors as important to their development. Thus, along with graduate training, counselor educators must encourage experiences that allow students opportunities to learn how to advocate, engage in systems thinking, navigate inconsistencies and various role expectations, and work through challenges. Counselor educators must also work with internship supervisors to ensure a quality experience for school counselors-in-training. As USCs often serve as internship supervisors for school counselors-in-training, USCs must take a thoughtful approach when training incoming counselors who will work in urban districts. Addressing helpful characteristics, fears, systemic issues, and improving their ability to multitask and navigate a complex system and relationships are key features to the learning process. Providing a quality experience for school counselors-in-training may help alleviate anxiety, increase productivity and a growth-mindset, and better support the diverse needs of all students.
Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed in regard to USCs lived experience and the various influences to their role in other urban districts, as each urban district has its own unique set of challenges and opportunities. Future research must continue to differentiate between urban and suburban or rural school counselor roles, in order to best understand school counselor experiences, challenges, and needed support. Additionally, research must look at how graduate students are trained to competently work with students of different races and those living in poverty. This is necessary as oppressive practices are rooted deeply in education and society at-large (Kendi, 2019; Mitchell, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020), which historically marginalized people experience everyday. Thus, USCs must not only recognize the experiences of their students but also work diligently to affect change within their schools, communities, and educational system at-large.

Research suggests that many of the services students from low-income backgrounds receive, such as mental health services and other resources, happen primarily at school (Hannon, 2016), so understanding specifically how USCs support mental health would be an interesting future study. Though USCs partner and refer to community organizations for services, they also have been uniquely trained to support the mental health needs of students, albeit in a brief capacity. Additionally, to develop trust with students USCs must spend time with them. Though important, USCs are often short on time due to their many responsibilities. Therefore, understanding how experienced USCs perform the role needed within the school context, including potential non-counseling tasks, while also servicing the needs of students would be beneficial.

Furthermore, though ASCA’s guidelines are a tool for understanding and implementing the role, not all school counselors are in a position to fully implement those standards (e.g.,
counselors with large caseloads, split between buildings, and so on). Though this seems obvious, USC\text{\textprime}s continue to feel tension between what they “should” be doing and what they realistically are able to do. Thus, further research might tap into this idea of uniform understanding of the role and whether or not it is realistic. Is it realistic to think USC\text{\textprime}s can forego non-counseling responsibilities when their staff is small and funding is low? Though this study does not directly answer those questions, it does show the complexity and challenges USC\text{\textprime}s experience, which could offer insight into how counselor educators and administrators explore supportive efforts and job crafting opportunities when training or hiring for the role. Likewise, more research would be valuable regarding USC\text{\textprime}s understanding about ways to affect organizational change, work within and manage system dynamics, especially when considering various systemic issues and personality differences.

Additionally, continued research specifically on how USC\text{\textprime}s advocate for their role within their prospective district would be beneficial. Advocacy efforts could center around funding, pay differences between urban and suburban roles, turnover of USC\text{\textprime}s, role design issues (e.g., USC\text{\textprime}s performing both counselor and registrar duties, USC\text{\textprime}s splitting time between schools), level of support from district personnel, and other challenges specific to urban districts. Understanding these experiences shed light on how USC\text{\textprime}s make sense of and perform their role. Ultimately, more research that highlights USC\text{\textprime}s experiences has the potential to create more relevant support for their role, which, in turn, influences the needs of students and families in urban communities.

\textbf{Conclusion}

USC\text{\textprime}s are in position to encourage a constructive and supportive learning environment for all students by advocating, leading, and collaborating with others. This study added to existing literature by uncovering the lived experiences of USC\text{\textprime}s, which went beyond understanding their
role conceptually. The findings of this phenomenological study aligned with the research questions and data yielded five themes and six subthemes. Themes and subthemes centered around counselor responsibilities, relationships, support for the role, and culture. Woven throughout USC's narratives included fluctuations of affect, a consistent sense of purpose, and competence for understanding students' experiences, worldviews, challenges, and systemic issues surrounding their educational experiences. Thus, listening to USC's and offering them an opportunity to share real experiences, thoughts, and feelings was invaluable and created space to more fully understand how they perform, navigate, and interpret their role. This increase in understanding into the lived experiences and affective states of USC's is important to create relevant support for school counselors to ensure competence, empathy, and confidence when working with students. Moreover, this study explored implications for USC's, school and district personnel, counselor educators and school counselors-in-training. Future recommendations are also provided and encouraged as a way to continue supporting the efforts, wellbeing, and development of USC's.
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Appendix A

Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: October 15, 2020

To: Jennifer Foster, Principal Investigator
   Jennifer Meador, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-10-11

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Understanding the Experiences of Urban School Counselors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) October 14, 2021 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.

251 W. Waldo Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456
Phone: (269) 387-6293, Fax: (269) 387-8176
Appendix B

Verbal Informed Consent

Western Michigan University
Evaluation Measurement and Research

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Foster
Student Investigator: Jennifer Meador
Title of Study: Experiences of Urban School Counselors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a study to meet dissertation requirements, and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of urban school counselors and will serve to meet the final PhD requirement. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to participate in a 60 to 90-minute virtual interview to describe your experiences as a school counselor in an urban setting. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a virtual focus group with other participants that will also be approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be the time it will take to participate and also potential discomfort from answering certain questions. Benefits of this study will allow greater understanding into the phenomena of urban school counselors. There are no alternative procedures or treatment at this time.

You are invited to participate in this study titled “Understanding the Experiences of Urban School Counselors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study” and the following information in this consent form will provide more details about the study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in this study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
School counselors often juggle a myriad of responsibilities and issues simultaneously, which make descriptive studies that uncover how urban school counselors navigate and perform their roles and responsibilities, amidst a complex environment, necessary. The purpose and rationale of this study is to increase understanding of how urban school counselors’ experience and make sense of their role in its’ totality. Greater understanding into the lived experiences of urban school counselors, how they make decisions, prioritize responsibilities, serve students, understand their role, and manage challenges can create relevant training and supervision opportunities.
Who can participate in this study?
You can participate in the study if you are a 1) licensed school counselor, 2) school counselor with at least one year of experience, and 3) school counselor who works in one midwestern urban school district.

Where will this study take place?
This study will take place virtually at a mutually agreed upon time.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
You will engage in one 60 to 90-minute virtual interview and a 60-90 minute virtual focus group for this study.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
The hope is that you engage in answering the questions honestly and in depth to increase understanding of their experiences.

What information is being measured during the study?
To achieve in depth understanding about the experiences of urban school counselors, you will be asked to share your stories. From these stories, significant statements will be highlighted, themes will emerge and be coded, and a description capturing the essence of the experience will be written.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
As these interviews will take place outside of the workday, it may be inconvenient for you. I imagine it may also provide some discomfort if or when you discuss stressors or challenges within your role. As a former school counselor, respect will be conveyed for the profession and the counselor role, which may contribute to positive rapport building. This mutual role understanding, may encourage a non-judgmental space that provides ease and comfort for you in conveying descriptive stories, which may increase rapport and authenticity.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
You will have the opportunity to explore your personal experiences as a school counselor in an urban setting. Additionally, information uncovered from the interview and focus group may add to the school counseling literature, which can increase support for the urban school counselor role.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
You will receive a $10 amazon gift card upon completion of both the virtual interview and focus group.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The dissertation committee will have access to the data. Your identity will not be released. Instead, an alias will be used.

**What will happen to my information or biospecimens collected for this research after the study is over?**
After information that could identify you has been removed, de-identified information collected for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study. The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Jennifer Foster at 352-988-3554 or jennifer.foster@wmich.edu. You may also contact Research Compliance Office at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

___________________________________  ____________________
Verbal acknowledgement                              Date
Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Dear [Counselor’s Name],

My name is Jennifer Meador and I am a Ph.D. student at Western Michigan University. I am currently working on my dissertation, which requires me to conduct a study on a topic of interest. As a former urban school counselor, I am very interested in the importance of this role and am interested to learn more about other school counselors’ experiences. Therefore, I am emailing you to ask if you would like to participate in my study.

Requirements to participate include 1) appropriate licensure, 2) at least one year of experience, and 3) current role within one urban school district. Your participation would require a one-on-one virtual interview with me that would last about 60 to 90 minutes. Additionally, you would be asked to participate in a virtual focus group with the other participants (5-10 people) that would last approximately 60-90 minutes. Both the interview and focus group would ideally take place between October and December 2020. In terms of confidentiality, no identifying information will be used to connect you to your answers.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me and I will send you further information regarding the study and your participation. You may contact me at Jennifer.a.meador@wmich.edu or 616-634-8784.

Thank you so much for your time! I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Meador
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Study: Understanding the Experiences of Urban School Counselors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

Time and Date of interview:

Interviewee and Demographics (years of experience, race, gender, age):

Brief Explanation:
I would like to thank you for participating in this conversation. I believe the urban school counselor role is important and dynamic and I am interested to learn more about your role and experiences. As a way to say thank you, will receive a $10 amazon gift card upon completion of both the virtual interview and focus group. Please feel free to say what you think and feel, not what you think I might want to hear. The conversation will be audio recorded, which will allow me to go back and listen, take notes, and then write a short summary about what was said. All of your comments will remain anonymous, which means you won’t be linked to what you said. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions:
3) What are the lived experiences of urban school counselors?
   a. Describe the counseling program in your school.
   b. Tell me about your role as a school counselor.
   c. When thinking about your role, describe any feelings or thoughts that come to mind.
   d. How would you describe the culture of your school/community?
   e. Describe your relationships with those in the school community, such as staff, administration, parents/caregivers, and students.
   f. What do you think influences (both challenges and strengths) your students’ school involvement and achievement?
   g. Tell me about a time you felt successful as a school counselor. Can you think of a time when you supported students as they navigated challenges associated with their environment?
   h. Reflect on a time you worked with a student and/or students who had experienced trauma. Describe that experience.
   i. Reflect back on your training and preparation to work as a school counselor. Describe that experience.
4) What does it mean to be an urban school counselor?
   a. Tell me what it means to you to be a school counselor?
   b. Tell me about a typical day – how you prioritize and make decisions.
   c. Tell me about how your role changed after the coronavirus pandemic (school closures).
   d. What drew you to the school counseling profession?
   e. When reflecting on your role as an urban school counselor, how might your role differ from a school counselor role in another district?
   f. What attributes do you believe are important to work as an urban school counselor?
   g. Was there anything I did not ask that you would like to share?
Appendix E

Focus Group Protocol

Study: Understanding the Experiences of Urban School Counselors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

Time and Date of Focus Group:

Participants:

Brief Explanation:
I would like to thank you for participating in this focus group, which will aim to clarify and expand on themes that were previously mentioned in your interviews. The conversation will be audio recorded, which will allow me to go back and listen, take notes, and then write a short summary about what was said. After reviewing the audio, the recording will be deleted.

Please keep in mind that participation in this focus group is completely voluntary. All responses are valid, so please feel free to say what you think and feel, not what you think me or someone else might want to hear. Again, you will receive a $10 amazon gift card upon completion of both the virtual interview and focus group.

To get through the material, I encourage you to stay on topic. Finally, I cannot guarantee confidentiality, but ask you to help protect others’ privacy by not discussing details outside the group. If you would like to participate, please read and provide verbal acknowledgement. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Upon hearing the preliminary themes, in what ways do these capture how you view role as a school counselor. What is not captured?
2. Upon hearing themes related to the role of the urban school counselor, what reactions do you have? Talk about the ideal role, the real role, and what you would change.
3. What are your reactions to themes related to urban school culture, community, and student influences?
4. Think about the environment in which you work and the emerging issues you deal with (e.g., crisis). Describe what that is like.
5. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a school counselor in an urban setting?

Thank you for participating in the interview. Was there anything I did not ask that you would like to share? As a reminder, all of your responses will be kept confidential.
### Appendix F

**Focus Group Member Checking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes related to program/role</th>
<th>Themes related to feelings &amp; thoughts of role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Important to familiarize yourself with school (leadership style of admin, expectations, etc.)</td>
<td>1. Wish there was more time for direct student contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lack of consistency influences role - staff/admin changes, responsibility shifts, last minute changes</td>
<td>2. Frustrated with gaps in staff/admin’s understanding about role – feel role is undervalued at times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perform non-counseling tasks - (scheduling, credit audits, testing, substituting, etc.)</td>
<td>3. Feelings fluctuate – frustration one day, excitement the next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Build relationships/connections with students</td>
<td>4. Passionate about working with students and making a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Provide advocacy, access, and opportunities for students</td>
<td>5. It is necessary to be flexible, creative, and able to adapt (COVID)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Support academic, social/emotional, and career development of students</td>
<td>6. Dislike school/district politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Form positive partnerships and work to bring people together to support students</td>
<td>7. Feel comfortable and settled in the role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Deal with emerging issues (e.g., crisis)</td>
<td>8. Feels overwhelming and difficult at times; tricky to manage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Admin support is important</td>
<td>9. Growth mindset and self-care are important to role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Partnerships are important to supporting the whole student</td>
<td>10. Wish for meaningful professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Students in urban setting may have less access or exposure</td>
<td>11. It’s important to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) recognize biases, b) give yourself grace, c) have boundaries, d) be empathetic, e) be transparent, f) be open minded, g) be able to advocate for yourself/role, h) have patience, and i) a genuine attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes related to urban school culture &amp; community</th>
<th>Themes related to student influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School culture improves when opportunities increase</td>
<td>1. Internal motivation of student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stability and turnover of staff/admin influence school culture</td>
<td>2. Skill and developmental level of students (emotional regulation, reading level, language ability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I wish there was more diversity from teachers, their perspectives, and teaching methods</td>
<td>3. Connections and relationships within school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mutual respect, support, autonomy from colleagues</td>
<td>4. Resiliency of student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. We get along like family</td>
<td>5. Access to resources, opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Feel supported</td>
<td>6. Parental support and engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Serve as a connector</td>
<td>7. No counselors in the elementary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Urban schools have more diversity (demographics, experiences)</td>
<td>8. Trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Admin support is important</td>
<td>9. Current societal influences/culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Partnerships are important to supporting the whole student</td>
<td>10. Home life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Students in urban setting may have less access or exposure</td>
<td>11. Stressors (deportation, incarcerated family members, racism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Students living on their own</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Teenage pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Staff not aware of their own biases, assumptions, privilege</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. School appeal (e.g., new/old)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix G

**Data Analysis Summary of Process**

**Analysis:** moving from particular to shared, from descriptive to interpretive, commitment to understanding a participant’s point of view, and focus on personal meaning making in particular contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Step 1 | True to IPA, analysis will begin during data collection  
|        | o writing memos about overall impressions, themes, connections with participants |
| Step 2 | Transcribe interviews (using both technology and by hand). Read and reread each line of transcripts to gain deeper understanding of the whole - noting what was said and how it was said (e.g., pauses, laughter). |
| Step 3 | From this understanding, highlight main ideas - known as significant statements |
| Step 4 | From significant statements, codes will emerge and be clustered together.  
|        | o zooming in and out to gain deeper understanding |
| Step 5 | As a second cycle method, pattern coding will be utilized  
|        | o restructuring themes from the initial coding process to develop a more organized and focused list – accounting for nuance, commonalities, differences. |
| Step 6 | Develop full narrative using data extracts, taking the audience through interpretation of experience. |

Richards, 2015; Saldana, 2016; Smith et al., 2012
# Appendix H

## Data Output

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Initial Coding</th>
<th>Phase 2: Themes emerge</th>
<th>Key Words/Ideas: to clarify themes and subthemes</th>
<th>Phase 3: Subthemes emerge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>USC Responsibilities</strong></td>
<td><strong>USC Activities: Fusion of Knowledge, Affect, and Variability</strong></td>
<td>program development; efforts split; lack of consistency; staff/admin changes/turnover; overwhelming; learning role; striving to be more ASCA aligned; non-school counseling tasks; adjustment; purpose; COVID-19; years of experience; attributes: calm, patient, organized, self-care</td>
<td><strong>Differentiators for How USCs Adapt</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overall Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>COVID-19</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Role Responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Purposefulness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Feelings/Perceptions of Role</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ideal role vs realistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Meaning/Purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Connections and Relationships:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building Relationships and Providing Support for Students</strong></td>
<td>Takes time; rapport; patience; multicultural competence; respect; success stories; challenges; trauma</td>
<td><strong>Trauma and Challenges</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Staff and Administration</td>
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<td>• Partnerships</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with Administration and Staff</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>staff/admin turnover, don't understand what counselors do, understanding, educational, supportive; We're friends; important for carrying out role</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Support for USC Role:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Experiential and Educational Opportunities</strong></td>
<td>meaningful professional development; Experiences; on-the-job training; caring professors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• meaningful professional development</td>
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<td>• Experiences</td>
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<td>• on-the-job training</td>
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<td>• caring professors</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Environment:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Urban School Culture</strong></td>
<td>Provides opportunities; challenging; many influences that look different for each student; multicultural competence needed; low pay; low funding; staff turnover; school pride; understanding students (motivation versus lazy)</td>
<td><strong>Influences</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Influences</td>
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<td>• Challenges</td>
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<td>• Needs</td>
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<td>• Urban vs. suburban/rural</td>
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