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**QUALITIES OF A SCHOOL COUNSELOR AND PRINCIPAL PARTNERSHIP THAT  
FOSTER STUDENT LEARNING AND SCHOOL CULTURE:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

BY

EEF FONTANEZ

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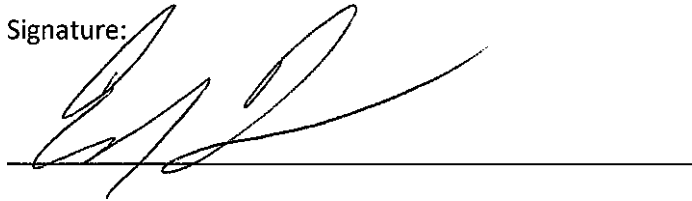
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Date: 11/12/2023

**QUALITIES OF A SCHOOL COUNSELOR AND PRINCIPAL PARTNERSHIP  
THAT FOSTER STUDENT LEARNING AND SCHOOL CULTURE: A  
QUALITATIVE**

BY

EEF FONTANEZ

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION

2023

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the esteemed educators from elementary school to graduate school that have supported me along the way and showed me that education and learning are efforts worth pursuing and that education can forever change your life.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to express my sincere thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. Carol Sommer, who has guided me on this journey to pursue my degree. I also want to thank my other members of my committee, Dr. Lawrence Crouch and Dr. Ken Engenbretson, on their continued support through this process. I also want to thank my friends and family who guided me on my way and gave me moral support as I conducted this research study and special thanks to Dr. Larry Sexton, Dr. Kim Naugle, and Dr. Muriel Stockburger for believing in me in obtaining my doctorate and encouraged me in every way to begin this process. As someone who has always sought out education, there were many educators who encouraged my process along the way including but not limited to Sharon Diaz, Linda Smith, Donna Hayes, Janet Fortune, and Keila and John Thomas.

## ABSTRACT

The close partnership between school counselors and principals suggested that their work together can influence student learning and school culture. Their roles, while different in nature, could be conducive to collaborating in an effective manner to help achieve their respective goals and the objectives of their employment responsibilities. Ideally, principals should fully understand the role of school counselors and allow them to implement a comprehensive counseling plan to increase student learning, reduce discipline issues, promote attendance, and positively impacts school culture. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), outlined the role of a professional school counselor to incorporate the removing of barriers to student success, be they personal, social, career, and/or academic (2012). The partnership between school counselors and principals should be inclusive, conducive to open communication, and rooted in a foundation of trust. As a school counselor, my interest in this topic motivated me to explore further this partnership between the two roles. The basic interpretive qualitative study investigated the essential qualities of an effective partnership between school counselors and principals and their role in enhancing student learning and enriching school culture. Surveys and interviews were used to identify the qualities of the school counselor–principal partnership which seemed to exert an effective, positive influence on student learning and school culture. Equally informative was the identification of qualities that were ineffective or had an adverse impact on student learning and school culture.

**Keywords:** student learning, school counselors, principals, school culture



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

School counselors has struggled with their professional identity. The school system viewed school counselors as administrators, but their training and credentials fell under the classification of mental health providers. School counselors were usually asked to provide mental health services to students and yet they were burdened with non-guidance-related duties, such as supervision, scheduling, and testing. School counselors seem to be caught between this dichotomy of administrative and counseling duties in their professional identity due to this role confusion. Likewise, they were usually evaluated by principals who possessed neither a school counseling background nor any real knowledge about what constituted the role of a counselor in school. In the role of school counselor, there was considerable ambiguity with respect to the identity, preparation, and leadership dimensions of school counselors among both the counselors and the principals (Young, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

School counselors played an essential role in the administrative leadership team of any school. In fact, many principals saw school counselors as administrators with regard to numerous school duties and functions, i.e., supervision, special education issues, discipline, and staff evaluations. School counselors were trained mental health providers whose skillset complemented and augmented many aspects of the mission, vision, and educational objectives of the school and its principal. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) dictated that the role of a school counselor was to

eliminate barriers to student success, be they personal, social, career, and/or academic. School counselors often sought to balance their administrative duties with their professional obligations to their students.

The principal was the person ultimately in charge of ensuring the academic success and standing of the school by way of curriculum, staff evaluations, and adherence to state standards and policies. The school counselor effectively assisted in these areas by implementing their own programs and services. In this study, a basic interpretive qualitative approach was applied to investigate the partnership between principals and school counselors to identify and assess the effective qualities of the partnership and their relative impact on student learning and school culture among prospective stakeholders such as administrators, counselors, teachers, and students (ASCA, 2012).

More precisely, the study distinguished effective from ineffective qualities in the school counselor–principal partnership in terms of its implications for student learning and school culture. It was thought that a negative partnership between school counselors and principals would lead to distrust, miscommunication, and a consequent lack of academic learning among students. Conversely, it was believed that a positive partnership between principals and school counselors culminated in improved academic learning, heightened staff morale, and better communication among all stakeholders. One study asserted that mutual trust and clear communication were needed to cultivate and maintain an effective partnership between school counselors and principals (Dollarhide et al., 2007). The basic interpretive study focused on the lived experiences

of school counselors and principals and the extent to which their partnership fostered student learning and enriched school culture.

### **School Culture**

School culture was defined in many ways by various people. In my opinion and experience as a school counselor, the way a school feels as you walk into the building can be described as the culture of the school. School culture was affected by many elements, including but not limited to teacher perceptions, student engagement, and parental influences.

While there were many indicators of school culture, the following information stated the author's own view of what school culture meant. The author stated:

[School culture] is a complex and important topic. One way of thinking about school culture is to see it as a holistic entity that pervades and influences everyone within a school. This perspective is favored by managerialists who equate a distinct homogeneous culture with effectiveness and success, and believe that organizational culture can be manipulated to achieve agreed upon educational objectives. (Prousser, 1999, p. 14)

School counselors, as part of this holistic entity, impacted school culture by creating programs and policies that together constituted a comprehensive counseling plan, one that was as systemic as it is school-wide. Holistic programs, for instance, improved student attendance, behavior, and academic performance by incorporating small group counseling and classroom guidance lessons. Ultimately, however, the programmatic impact of school counselors was entirely dependent on how the principal viewed the role of school counselors in implementing such programs (ASCA, 2012). If the principal saw little value in these programs, it was exceedingly difficult for the counselors to actualized them

## **Management Agreement**

The ASCA (2012) recommended that school counselors create a management agreement with the principal concerning their two roles and responsibilities. The agreement outlined what the principal expected of the school counselors and how they viewed the counselors' role within the school. In fact, ASCA stated that school counselors should be expected to "build effective teams by encouraging collaboration among students, teachers, administrators, and school staff to work toward the common goals of equity, access, and academic success" (2012, p. 6). The management agreement allowed the school principal and counselors to agree on how this collaboration would be achieved. Additionally, the management agreement permitted the school counselors to work with the principal to establish an agreed-upon set of job descriptions, which included more school counseling duties than non-school counseling duties. Appendix A provided an example of a management agreement proposed by the ASCA, the purpose of which was to assist school counselors and principals in outlining their respective job duties. Overall, the management agreement encouraged the cultivation of the partnership between school counselors and principals.

When a management agreement was created, the following elements were included:

- The stipulation that the agreement be signed by the principal and the school counselor within the first two months of the current academic year.



- The rationale used to determine how to allocate the use of the school counselor's time.
- 
- The specification of how the mission and vision of the school counseling program are aligned with those of the school.
- A list of the duties and caseload of the school counselor.
- Details about the professional development of the school counselor (ASCA, 2012).

The management agreement between the school counselors and the principal served as the foundation for understanding the role of the school counselors and the nature of their partnership with the principal, as well as the ways in which the partnership accommodated or facilitated the vision, objectives, and mission established for the school. Some clear goals of the partnership included improving student learning, raising staff and school morale, and enhancing communication between all stakeholders. However, all too often, school principals failed to agree with the school counselors concerning how their time was utilized. In many cases, the principals relegated the counselors to performing duties that were not associated with counseling, such as discipline, scheduling, and testing (ASCA, 2012).

### **Role Confusion**

School counselors were constantly confronted with role confusion within their schools as many school administrators, including the principal who would be often

unaware of the essential training and skills required to become a school counselor.

Underwood (2015) explored such role confusion:

Stakeholders have varying expectations of school counselors, some of which conflict with the expectations of school counselors or other stakeholders. Role ambiguity occurs when the responsibilities and duties are not articulated from the various stakeholders to the school counselor, so expectations and responsibilities are unclear. Role incongruence results from school counselors being asked to perform duties beyond their training or resources. (p. 2)

Role confusion was an especially pertinent issue when it came to the implementation of school counselor programs and services. Some school principals were not aware of the unique and essential training school counselors received and how their services and programs positively impacted student learning. Lieberman (2004) believed that “confusion and lack of clarity regarding the role and function of counselors in schools have been visible and problematic in the educational field for years” (p. 553). Role confusion led to mistrust between school counselors and administrators, including the principal, as well as poor communication. School counselors felt that they were being undervalued which led to poor work ethic and burnout in certain circumstances.

### **School Counseling Plans**

School counselors struggled to implement comprehensive counseling plans in cases of high student–counselor ratios, low student attendance, numerous behavioral incidents, low graduation rates, poor test scores, and wide gaps in achievement (Young, 2013). According to ASCA (2012), the basic goal of any comprehensive counseling plan was to reduce barriers to student success. Accordingly, the counseling plan included practices and policies that would support and augment the mission, objectives,

and vision of the school for its students and staff. Young stated (2013) that “a school counselor leader should be able to articulate the rationale for the school counseling mission, its alignment with the instructional vision and how it translates to student outcomes” (p. 36). The nature, quality, and the interactive dynamics of partnerships between school counselors and principals was considered paramount to determining the extent to which their respective programs and policies would be successfully implemented and mutually supported.

### **Program Assessment**

School counselors have assessed and discussed existing counseling programs with the principal prior to implementing their own programs and services. According to Zyromski and Mariani (2016), school counselors periodically reviewed their programs and services to determine what was working well, what was not, and what has yet still needed to be implemented. Based on this review, the school counselors decided what to eliminate, augment, or add. Zyromski and Mariana (2016), recommended that school counselors should operate according to a strength-based approach, especially given that “whether you are a first-year school counselor or a counselor with twenty years of experiences, the idea of evolving to a different way of doing things can be intimidating” (2016, p. 10). The assessment of counseling programs was seen as an element of growth instead of as a tactic to eliminate counseling positions or programs.

ASCA (2012) recommended that school counselors assessed their comprehensive counseling plan at least once a year to ensure its effectiveness. The findings of these assessments were made available to all stakeholders, especially the

principal, the teachers, and parents. Input from all of these stakeholders would be requested to improve the counseling program and either eliminated or expanded those components that had been demonstrated to be ineffective or effective, respectively. The assessments were used to identify services that were not being provided or not being implemented in other programs in the school. ASCA (2012) advised that after the assessment phase, an action plan should be created to “efficiently and effectively deliver the school counseling programs” (p. 53).

### **Method of Study**

Basic interpretative qualitative study. A basic interpretive qualitative research approach was applied in this study to examine the lived experiences of school counselors and principals. A variety of qualitative tools was deployed to better comprehend the school counselor–principal partnership, including surveys and interviews. Study participants consisted of school counselors and principals at the school and district levels. Survey participants were recruited through various listservs operated by the state of Kentucky, such as the school counselor and principal listservs. These listservs, on which counselors and principals could sign up to become members, were managed by the University of Kentucky.

Interviews were conducted with school counselors and principals to identify which of their qualities, duties, and aims were most conducive to fostering and improving student learning and enriching school culture. In Appendix B, examples of pre-interview (screening) questions was used to identify likely interview participants are provided. Appendix C listed some of the interview questions that were posed to the

participants. While the interview questions served as a guide to facilitate discussion, follow-up questions were asked to further the understanding of the research topic and myself.

Surveys were administered to current school counselors and principals to gauge their perceptions of their partnership. Survey questions included both open-ended and closed ended questions relating to the partnership between school counselors and principals. The rationale for the use of both question types was that doing so would likely yield more information than would be possible via a standard survey format. A copy of the research survey can be found in Appendix D.

### **Research in the Era of COVID-19**

Conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its accompanying lockdowns and social distancing measures, was particularly challenging, especially using qualitative research methods. Wa-Mbaleka and Costa (2020) stated that “while social research is needed, especially qualitative research, COVID-19 made it difficult for people to conduct research due to social distancing and the closure of Ethics Review Boards” (p. 16). The foundation of a basic interpretive qualitative study were conversations with study participants regarding their lived experiences concerning the topic being investigated. Every effort was made to ensure that the interviews were both safe and engaging. Toward this end, some of the interviews were completed virtually, i.e., via Zoom or Google Meets. Other interviews were carried out by phone or in person depending on appropriate levels of compliance with safety precautions by both parties.

## **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of the basic interpretive qualitative study was to examine the partnership between school counselors and principals with respect to improving student learning and enriching school culture. Qualities of the partnership that fostered positive outcomes within the school and among students, staff, parents, and community members were identified. Conversely, the research also identified negative aspects of the partnership that may ultimately hindered student learning and degraded school culture. Taken together, the research assessed the variable effects of these different qualities on student success (College Board, 2011).

## **Perspective of the Researcher**

As a practicing school counselor, I knew first-hand the problems confronting the profession. Role confusion was clearly evident and pervasive, compelling school counselors to cultivate and maintain a professional identity among school staff and principals, who often did not actually know what constituted the job description and duties of school counselors. School counselors were relegated to performing non-counseling duties, such as scheduling, supervision, and discipline (ASCA, 2012). According to ASCA (2012), most of the school counselor's time (80%) was meant to be dedicated to delivering direct guidance services to students (p. 44). Therefore, school counselors and principals possessed a shared understanding of the role of the school counselor as well as how they could be implemented in their programs and services to

meet the ASCA recommendations, including the amount of time allocated to guidance services for students.

I have knowledge of what has proven to be helpful in my experience as a school counselor, and I was curious to learn the extent to which other counselors and principals possessed similar or different views pertaining to such experiences. I have worked with principals who did not value the work and programs of school counselors or who viewed counselors as assistant principals instead of qualified mental health providers with the capacity to implement their own programs to help improve student learning and enrich school culture. I have also worked with administrators who appreciated the work of school counselors and who acknowledged the impact of their programs and services on the students and the school as a whole. My various experiences as a school counselor greatly contributed to and informed my intention to learn more about the counselor–principal partnership.

### **Description of Key Terms**

*American School Counseling Association (ASCA).* This is a national organization that oversees school counseling associations in each state. The ASCA stipulates policies, procedures, and professional development activities for professional school counselors (ASCA, 2012).

*Administrators.* A category that includes principals, assistant principals, deans of students, and superintendents, all of whom have evaluative power over school staff, including school counselors.

*Comprehensive School Counseling Plan.* A plan that outlines the policies and procedures applied by school counselors. These plans consist of programs to be

implemented by the school counselor to remove barriers to student achievement.

*School Culture.* The way a school feels as you enter the building.

*Stakeholders.* Any individual who is impacted by the professional partnership between school counselors and principals.

## **Research Questions**

The central question addressed in the basic interpretive qualitative study was as follows: “How does the partnership between school counselors and principals impact student learning and school culture?” The unique partnership between school counselors and principals was explored to identify qualities and characteristics that benefited or hindered student learning and enriched or degraded school culture. The research questions were used to devise the interview questions asked of study participants.

Below is a sample of these questions that were used in the interview process:

1. What qualities and characteristics of the partnership between school counselors and principals enhance student learning?
2. What qualities and characteristics of school counselors and administrators permit successful partnerships between them?
3. How do school counselors and principals cultivate their partnership to enhance student learning?
4. What qualities and characteristics of the partnership between school counselors and principals hinder student learning?
5. How do poor partnerships between school counselors and administrators hinder student learning and degrade school culture?



Additionally, Brott and Myers (1999) noted additional questions that could be asked in qualitative studies of school counseling programs and services:

1. What factors determine the school counseling program?
2. Who is involved in determining the school counseling program?
3. How are decisions made in the school counseling program?
4. How does the school counselor deal with conflict with the principal?
5. What is the decision-making process between the school counselor and principals when it comes to the professional school counselor identity?
6. In what way do conflict decisions reflect the role of school counselors?

I used numerous approaches in the basic interpretive qualitative study to answer the essential research question of how a positive partnership between school counselors and administrators impacted student learning and school culture. Identifying the qualities of a positive partnership helped other school counselors and administrators enhance their own partnerships in these areas. I identified negative partnership qualities that would lead to a change in the behaviors and policies of school counselors and principals aimed at improving their partnership for the good of students, staff, and parents. Highlighting in study, what did not work in such partnerships represented the foundation for their improvement between the school counselor and principals.

According to Merriam and Associates (2002), basic interpretive research permitted the interpretation of findings and analysis of data in a constructivist manner. I interviewed and surveyed school counselors and principals, relying on their answers and responses to interpret their lived experiences concerning their partnerships and the ways in which the partnerships influence student learning. Merriam and Associates (2002)

asserted that using basic interpretive research techniques can culminate in a perspective that speaks to the experiences of participants and clarifies their frame of reference with respect to the research topic. The research data was collected from interviews from a total of 9 counselors and principals and from surveys distributed via listservs. If saturation was not reached at this point, additional data would be collected via more interviews.

I primarily used a basic interpretive research approach with some phenomenological elements. According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), interview strategies were very useful in qualitative research. Interviews responses were transcribed and coded to generate various themes within the interviews. I used these themes and codes to identify common topics and highlight key terms, concepts, and ideas from the interviews. The phenomenon under investigation was the partnership between school principals and counselors and it impacted improving student learning and enriching school culture. Through the application of the basic interpretive approach combined with phenomenological elements, the lived experiences of school counselors and principals' relationship were examined and how they impacted the partnership between the two roles that could led to a positive working partnership and improved school culture.

Using the interviews and surveys, I identified common themes related to the research question between counselors and principals and coded them for analytical purposes. A transcription service analyzed the interviews which helped to identify key findings. I collected, studied, and analyzed the data to ensure an appropriate description

of the findings. After the analysis of the data, the findings were described to capture the essence of the phenomenon being studied.

### **Ethics**

I adhered to all ethical and professional standards by referring to the Kentucky Department of Education standards and best practices for school counselors. All efforts were made to ensure that the research findings were not influenced by my own personal experiences as a school counselor. According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standard 6, stated it is considered appropriate to be “ethical and culturally relevant (in) strategies for conducting, interpreting, and reporting the results of research” (2016). I worked with my dissertation committee to ensure that biases were not evident and, when found, were appropriately addressed. As discussed later in the dissertation, I kept a journal and participated in reflections, as doing so allowed me to not only think about my research but helped me to address my own internal biases and address them as needed.

### **Limitations**

The research sample focused solely on Kentucky rather than those participants from other states which represented both a limitation and a strength. The findings provided a unique look at the school counselor–principal partnership within the state of Kentucky and could be especially helpful in providing information of particular relevance to Kentucky schools. While focusing on only Kentucky personnel, the use of the University of Kentucky listserv, was primarily used by Kentucky educators which

allowed them to provide input of their lived experiences which was later compared to national data. Even though the intent of the research was to focus primarily on Kentucky school counselors and principals, some could see it as a limitation due to its limited scope of only one state. The findings of Kentucky educators was compared to national data and literature and the Counselor Education and Supervision Network listserv could also be used in the future to assess a wider audience and gather a larger sample of responses from around the nation.

According to Naresh (2020), another limitation of qualitative research was that it can be time consuming and labor-intensive. Naresh asserted that correlation does not mean causation and that identifying patterns could be difficult depending on the answers given by respondents on the surveys and during the interviews. I paid close attention to my own inherent biases to avoid assuming causation in the responses of the participants. As a practicing school counselor, I avoided using a participant's response to validate my own opinion on the topic being discussed in the study.

## **Conclusion**

The partnership between school counselors and principals was found to be paramount to student success. School counselors should work closely with the principal to ensure the implementation of their vision and goals for the school. In a perfect, ideal situation, the counselors and principals would work together for the betterment of the school, staff, and students. The present study provided information regarding the unique partnership between school counselors and principals in Kentucky. Data collected in the study was used to further enhance the partnership among stakeholders and provide a

foundation in which school counselors and principals work together to ensure student success and an engaging school culture.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

In the times of high-stakes testing and accountability in student achievement, teachers and administrators faced an ever-increasing demand to raise test scores, increase college readiness levels, and meet state and national benchmarks. At the same time, they were expected to actively work toward reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates. Student learning was attributed to many factors within the school, such as student–teacher relationships, class size, and curricular policies, to name a few. One significant possible attribute that impacted student learning was the partnership that existed between school counselors and principals. It was important to examine the literature on the role of the partnership that existed between school counselors and principals, which positively or negatively affected student learning.

### **School Counselor’s Role**

School counselors played a critical role in removing barriers to student success in partnership with their principals and ensured all students were successful while attending their schools. Unfortunately, Clark and Stone (2001) maintained that school counselors were usually left out of the dialogue relevant to school improvement. Lately, school counselors experienced a change in this assumption. Some principals knew the importance of school counselors when it comes to teaching, invoking leadership, and advocating for equitable access for all students in the school. On the other side, some school counselors and principals did not see each other as partners in student achievement indicated by some of the literature. Clark and Stone (2001) asserted that counselors and principals could be important to each other as they can implement

programs, policies, missions, and visions. School counselors and principals worked together to help students meet required standards, removed academic barriers, and promoted student success.

### **Perceptions of Counselor Roles**

One of the most undefined roles within school was the job of school counselor. The American School Counseling Association's National Model, A Framework for School Counseling Programs (ASCA, 2012) noted that the school counselor's role was relegated to non-counselor duties, such as supervision, testing, and scheduling. Kirchner and Setchfield (2005) asserted that many times the principal's view of the role of school counselors was not congruent with the ASCA National Model. Principals did not recognize the school counselor's role as one of promoting and enhancing student learning. Instead, many principals relegated additional duties that the principal did not wish to complete, such as special education referral meetings, 504 committee chair, supervision, and student discipline, to school counselors. Kirchner and Setchfield (2005) explained that school counselors were still struggling to identify their appropriate roles in schools and that many school counselors and principals remain confused on what, exactly, the role of a school counselor should be in student accountability.

### **Role Confusion**

School counselor roles and duties were dictated by the principal. Kirchner and Setchfield (2005) believed that "school principals often determine what tasks are given

priority by counselors, so their perceptions of the counselor's role can have a strong



impact on tasks that the counselors are assigned” (p. 10). Principals who had a good understanding of the role of a school counselor usually valued the counselor’s programs and delivery systems. The principals worked closely with their counselors to ensure that counseling initiatives were aligned with the principal’s mission and vision for the school and eventually saw their school counselors as their educational equals.

Principals who did not understand the role of a school counselor assigned the counselor to non-guidance duties, which included discipline, administrative duties, and testing which led to massive role confusion. These principals lacked the foresight into understanding how having a certified school counselor who implemented data-driven policies impacted student achievement. Principals in their administrative training were not traditionally educated in how to use their school counselors effectively. Krichner and Setchfield (2005) stated that a principal who had at least one course in counseling at the graduate level, usually saw the value of their school counselors and their programs. Unfortunately, in many principal preparation programs, the topic of school counselor and principal partnership was rarely discussed which added to the constant role confusion.

School counselors struggled with their professional role to validate their programs and services within the schools for years. Sweeny (1966) discussed the difficult task school counselors had in creating their identity after funds were made available to increase the number of school counselors in public schools by the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Sweeney wrote “school counselors did not have a clear concept of their role, they tended to perform more clerical and administrative tasks than they did guidance or counseling functions” (1966, p. 844). Sweeney asserted that school

counselors served at the discretion of their principals, who, for many years, did not understand the priorities, programs, and services the school counselors should perform. Principals were often not knowledgeable about the role of school counselors or how they could best be used to help student learning.

School counselors struggled to define their roles with principals who had a limited understanding of how a school counselor's programs and services influenced student learning. School counselors tried to identify their roles within the school when the principal either did not respect their roles or fully understood their potential. While this may have been the norm, recently an increasingly number of school counselors and principals have understood the importance of each other's roles in the school and how they helped each other achieve the best outcomes for all of their students. Finally, school counselors have made headway and improved their functions and roles within the school and how they helped the principal's goals to ensure that all students were learning at a high level.

There was a significant amount of literature that supported the idea that principals could impact the role of school counselors. Perusse et al. (2004) stated that principals who defined the role of school counselors and outlined their specific job duties had clearer goals and objectives for the counseling programs. Unfortunately, an obstacle to the partnerships between principals and school counselors was the lack of agreement on what constituted the job of a school counselor. Perusse et al. (2004) asserted that the success of a school counseling program was directly related to the support provided by the building principals. Dollarhide et al. (2007) believed that "the

counselor-principal relationship (partnership) in an exemplary counseling program included mutual trust and clear communication (p. 360).

Principals who trusted their school counselors and who helped implement the principal's vision and mission had a more harmonious partnership together. The literature suggested that principals who had a forward-thinking vision on the role of a school counselor saw their schools and students obtained student learning at high levels, increased student graduation rates, and raised college and career readiness skills for post-graduation success. The principal worked with their school counselors to have them included in the principal's mission and vision within their own school counseling programs. It was not until school counselors and principals focused on their own partnership that they attended to student learning and accountability.

### **Professional School Counselor Identity**

The role of school counselors was very confusing and limited to the tasks that the principal thought they should perform. One of the first steps in the elimination of role confusion was to create a professional school counselor identity. Brott and Myers (1999) asserted that this identity eliminated role confusion and educated principals on what the school counselor should actually be doing. Furthermore, the professional identity of school counselors led to an understanding among everyone in the school about what constituted their duties and roles. Brott and Myers argued that the professional identity of school counselors helped the students to receive appropriate counseling services, as the counselors would not be occupied with non-guidance duties. The creation of the professional identity of school counselors took time and did not

occur overnight. It involved working with teachers and principals to create the ideal identity. Once this was achieved, the school counselors was able to begin to implement programs and services that benefited all of the students in the school.

### **School Counselor and Principal Partnership**

The College Board (2011) investigated the partnership between school counselors and principals, which outlined several areas for improvement. These areas included mutual trust and respect, increased principal–counselor communication, and a shared vision and input concerning decision-making in the school. The College Board further indicated that open communication, having school counselors placed on leadership teams, and the school counselors recognized the importance of student learning were all instrumental to the positive facilitation of the partnership between school counselors and principals. It was further noted that not having these positive elements created role confusion, unclear job expectations, and allowed for impediments to the delivery of school counseling programs and services (The College Board, 2011). Even though school counselors were the most trained mental health providers in the school, they were often relegated to professional clerical positions, which failed to apply their educational training.

In addition to the College Board, other researchers outlined four specific viewpoints and their effectiveness when it came to the school counselor’s connection with principals. Janson et al. (2008) identified four key types of connection models for school counselors and principals: working alliance, impediments to alliance, shared leadership, and purposeful collaboration. Each of these types of connections were

examined by the authors with their pros and cons outlined. Out of the various types of connection models listed, the authors indicated that the purposeful collaboration model was the most successful among school counselors and principals. In this model, school counselors and principal were intentional in their conversations and decisions when it came to student learning, reducing achievement gaps, and identifying specific student barriers to success. School counselors and principals worked together to make sure both parties were on the same page and all policies were geared toward helping students be successful (Janson et al., 2008). School counselors and principals were intentional in their conversations about the role they played within the school. The intentional discussion focused on student learning and how the school counselor and principals worked together to achieve high student achievement and accountability.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, (CACREP) Section 5 has advocated for the need for a certified school counselor in every school across the nation who have been trained in pre-service programs to address the ever-increasing needs of students as well as barriers to student achievement, whether they be personal, social, career, or academic (CACREP, 2009). Researchers explored the importance of the partnership that must exist between the principals and school counselors to work in a collaborative model to promote student achievement and to reduce the barriers to student success. Clark and Stone (2001) believed that new attitudes between principals and school counselors helped both roles to join together to promote leadership and advocacy, and to improve on the school's mission, vision, and climate.

Wahyuni et al. (2019) asserted that a negative school climate impacted the effectiveness of a school counselor by leading to professional burnout and fatigue. Wahyuni et al. believed that an improved school climate between the principal and school counselor led to social and emotional support needed by the school counselor. Improved school climate, improved how the school counselor was seen in their role within the school. School counselors who were able to perform guidance services were found to have higher performance rates than those who were unable to do so or who participated mainly in non-guidance duties. It was further stated that a “supportive school climate for guidance and counseling contributed to high performance achievement of the teachers” (Wahyuni et al., 2019, p. 1370). School climate significantly impacted the role the school counselors performance and how they identified in their professional duties.

Wahyuni et al. (2019) concluded that principals played an important role in creating the school climate in either a positive or negative way by implementing their own policies and procedures. School counselors who felt empowered to enact their programs and services contributed to building a positive school climate that promoted good teaching, appropriate student behavior, and increased student learning. Unfortunately, school counselors who felt as if they could implement their programs and services could contribute to a toxic and negative school climate, one which was not student-centered or did not promote high student achievement. School counselors added or subtracted from the school climate by the way in which they perceived their role.

The important partnership that existed between school counselors and their principals was paramount to their students and staff as discovered in the research of this

study. Working collaboratively for the best interest of everyone in the school, was seen as the benchmark that all school counselors and principals work toward. The partnership that was built on trust, respect, and professionalism only added to the positive outcomes of students and school culture. Waalkes et al. (2019) proposed that mutual respect between school counselors and principals led to open communication and improved trust between them. The improved communication and trust helped school counselors to implement their programs and helped promoted student achievement. The goal was for school counselors and principals enhance their partnership to ensure that they agreed on the school counselor's role and on how the school counselor could enhance the principal's objectives and learning targets for the students and the school.

Waalkes et al. (2019) asserted that communication was key when it came to the school counselors and their partnership with the principals. It was important having an open-door policy with both roles which allowed for transparency and open, honest discussions. The open-door policy eliminated secrecy and innuendo and promoted frank conversations between school counselors and principals. With open communication, the principals knew what was going on in the school and the school counselor understood the expectations and obligations which were set forth by the principal on a weekly, monthly, and yearly basis.

The partnership between school counselors and administrators was strengthened by effective communication with teachers, staff, parents, and students. Duslak and Geier (2017) believed that a strong partnership between principals and school counselors could enhance role understanding, avoid burnout, and impact the overall

performance of the school. Additionally, a strong communication style between principals and school counselors also increased trust, promoted a shared vision, distributed leadership, and encouraged empathy and respect (2017). A more trusting relationship between school counselors and administrators helped each to perform their duties and helped students to be successful.

Zalaquett and Chatters (2012) suggested that the principal's perceptions of the roles and duties of school counselors determined the outcome of their partnership. When the principal and the school counselors included differing opinions about the counselor's role, vague, undefined job descriptions resulted in the work place. ASCA (2012) suggested that the school counselors and principals should define the role of school counselors prior to the beginning of the academic year so that everyone could be on the same page regarding the expectations and duties of the counselors.

Waalkes et al. (2019) contended that school counselors negotiated their job description and duties, outlined the percentage of time spent on guidance duties, and determined how they are going to deliver their comprehensive counseling plans. The negotiated plan should be in the form of a management agreement on the terms both the principal and school counselor agreed upon and should eliminate a significant amount of confusion about the role of the school counselor. ASCA (2012) recommended that the management agreement dictated the time spent on direct services to the students. The agreement outlined the delivery systems used by the school counselors and their caseloads. The management agreement outlined the ASCA domains and standards being attained via the delivery systems (small group, individual, and classroom counseling) as well as the professional development of the school counselors, how the



counselors collaborated with outside agencies, and what supplies and materials would be used in delivering the programs and services.

The ASCA management agreement went into further detail regarding the counselor's time. The agreement suggested that school counselors spend less than 20% of their time on non-guidance duties and nearly 80% of their time delivering direct guidance services to their students (2012). The delivery methods was in the form of either individual counseling sessions, counseling students in groups on various topics, classroom guidance, and offering programs that students could attend throughout the day at school via assemblies, guest speakers, and the referral system to outside agencies. School counselors were charged with ensuring that students had equitable access to their programs and provided services to all students in the school.

### **Effective School Counseling Plans**

House and Hayes (2002) argued that having a high-quality, comprehensive school counseling program promoted a positive impact on the social, career, and academic development of students. The authors noted that excluding school counselors from the current debate on school reform would be a mistake because school counselors were on the front lines of education reform and initiatives (2002). School counselors implemented special programs, such as anti-drug awareness, college and career readiness skills, anti-bullying lessons, and advocate equitable policies for all students to address student issues within the school and promote student achievement.

## **The Use of Data.**

ASCA (2012), outlined the use of data to implement programs to remove barriers in the academic, personal/social, or career domains. School counselors used attendance, behavior, and testing data to create programs and policies and procedures to ensure student received appropriate services to meet the needs of the school.

Based on the data, an effected comprehensive counseling plan included three major components: content, organizational framework, and resources (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). The plan consisted of competencies and standards that were student-focused and related to removing barriers to student success. The guidance program led by student data, utilized evidenced-based strategies and techniques, and used of a variety of delivery methods, included responsive services and individual student planning, only enhanced the role of school counselor within the school. The program was evaluated frequently to enhance the school guidance program. Programs deemed to be successful were enhanced, and programs that were found to be ineffective was targeted to be eliminated (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

Data was extremely important when building and implementing guidance services and programs for an effective school counseling plan. It was important to use various types of data for making informed decisions within the school counselor's evidenced-based program (ASCA, 2012). For example, school counselors used attendance data, discipline referrals, testing information, and surveys to ascertain the needs of their students, according to ASCA (2012). The varying types of data used demonstrated the effectiveness of program services or helped the school counselor revised or eliminated existing programs that had little impact on student learning.

Zyromski and Mariani (2016) believed that school counselors use process data, perception data, and outcome data to make informed decisions in regard to comprehensive guidance programs. Using various forms of data allowed the school counselor to create baselines to determine whether their programs and services were effective. The data permitted the school counselor to create pre- and post-assessments and evaluated the effectiveness of their programs. And finally, the data legitimized the school counselor's roles and duties, which should be shared with everyone in a variety of ways, including spreadsheets, emails, and PowerPoints. Clark and Stone (2001) noted the following when compiling student data:

Many school counselors have databases available that contain biographical, scheduling, attendance, discipline, and test history information. The information in these databases can be exported to relational databases to provide more flexibility and increased accessibility to more student information. (p. 51)

Using data provided a basis for school counselors which validated their programs and delivery systems (ASCA, 2012). Providing necessary data to their principals helped the school counselor ensure that the principals knew what the school counselor was doing during a typical day in their programs. Principals viewed the data to determine what a non-typical day also looked like for their school. It was important in the literature that “policymakers and counseling leaders acknowledge the power of data to inform instructional outcomes and to channel school counselors’ roles in school reform” (Young & Kaffenberg, 2019, p. 67).

ASCA (2012) recommended that the school counselor present to the principal the data and the ways the programs and services were increasing attendance, reducing discipline referrals, and influencing student learning. The data provided accountability and validity for the school counselors and their programs. Young and Kaffenberg

(2019) believed that accountability should be used as a catalyst to enhance the school counselors' credibility and impact the outcomes of their programs. Additionally, the data showed that having a school counselor who implemented effective school counseling programs "increased academic achievement, sustained positive teacher relationships, and overall positive student success" (Young & Kaffenberg, 2019, p 68). Using data created informed goals that the school counselors implemented within their programs that had a significant impact on student learning and school culture. Implementation of these school counseling goals "gave focus to the school counseling program. They defined how the vision and mission were accomplished and guided the development of the curriculum" (Zyromski & Mariani, 2016, p. 39).

### **School Counselors as Leaders**

School counselors were used as leaders within the school, who provided guidance for parents, students, teachers, and principals. Bore and Bore (2009) stated that school counselors were in a unique position to assist principals in their missions and visions for their schools as they acted like the school's eyes and ears of the building. The partnership between school counselors and principals was seen as a collaborative effort instead of the traditional top-down approach that was often seen in so many schools today. School counselors served as an integral part to the comprehensive counseling planning that were involved in decision-making activities and allowed to advocate for their programs and services (Bore & Bore, 2009). School counselors and school principals were partners within the school instead of being involved in an adversarial partnership between the two roles.

Additionally, ASCA (2012) recommended that school counselors be seen as school leaders, be empowered to make decisions that impact student achievement, be included in school decision teams, and be vital leaders who impacted decisions made at all levels at the school. School counselors have been considered part of the administration team but are sometimes not allowed to be at the table when decisions have to be made. The decisions about whether to include school counselors was usually made by the district superintendent or principal. School counselors included in the decision-making process of the school provided their input about policies and procedures that affected the school and student learning. The school counselor added to the policy discussion by seeing how their programs and services can assist in student learning. Sometimes it took the school counselors to think outside the box before the principal to make a final decision that influenced the school and the students.

Janson et al. (2009) suggested that the level at which the school counselors were involved in decision-making at the school depended on how they saw themselves as leaders. The school counselors and principals “are natural partners who should complement one another in the task of serving students and form a partnership based on knowledge, trust, and a positive professional regard” (Zalaguet & Chatters, 2012, p. 100). Janson et al. (2009) commented that school counselors needed to assert their leadership within the school to enhance their roles and duties. Barriers to leadership manifested in many sources, including the principal, staff, lack of training, and role confusion that existed in many schools. School counselors asserted their leadership potential in the school and used student data to reinforce the effectiveness of their programs and services. The data provided supported their leadership abilities within the

school. School counselors who were seen as leaders were vital to the success of their programs and services (2009).

School counselors relied on all of their professional staff within the school, including teachers, psychologists, social workers, and other school counselors. Gysbers and Henderson (2001) found that continued training was needed for school counselors to enhance their leadership abilities, which in turn would help them to be held accountable for their programs and their potential impact on student learning. School counselors needed to be involved in decision-making activities and be allowed to advocate for their programs and their students.

The concept of school counselor as a leader was relatively new and thus the research was not that in depth (Mason, 2010). School counselors as leaders was vital to implementing their comprehensive counseling plans. The school counselors applied their skills to work with principals, teachers, and parents and promoted their programs and services. Mason (2010) suggested that more research was needed to determine what leadership qualities were most effective for helping school counselors implement comprehensive counseling plans and how they should continue to work with the school principal. Research in this area has ascertained that “it is not surprising that literature describing leadership strategies for school counselors calls for the involvement of principals” (Dollarhide et al., 2007, p. 360).

Additionally, school counselors as leaders produced profound changes in the school and its mission. School counselors implemented programs that encouraged equity, diversity, and access to the curriculum provided at the school. The school counselor augmented the mission and vision of the school by implementing an effective

school counseling program as described by ASCA (2012). Curry and Devoss (2009) noted that “school counselors are leaders and advocates who affirm diversity while promoting equitable access to educational resources, excellence in education, and post-secondary education for all students” (p. 64).

There are four steps which enhanced the role of school counselors as leaders and their programs (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). First, develop a trusting work environment by increased communication was crucial and to eliminating role confusion concerning school counselors. Second, reformed licensure programs was essential. Lambie and Williamson (2004) found that teaching experience was not related to effective counseling practices. Pre-service program leaders should work with state offices to change existing laws that require teaching experience to become a school counselor (Kentucky has adopted this policy as well). Next, Lambie and Williamson noted the lack of state standards and expectations for school counselors and the fact that they were often evaluated by non-counselor administrators, such as central office personnel or principals. As such, the feedback or comments received from their evaluation was not pertinent to their growth as a school counselor or their professional development. Finally, the authors noted that school counselors must have their non-guidance duties reassigned. The time and energy devoted to non-guidance duties distracted the school counselor from the time and energy needed to implement their comprehensive school counseling plans (Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

In accordance with the literature, the alliance between school counselors and principals was critical when it comes to student achievement and reducing achievement gaps (ASCA, 2012). School counselors and principals should work together to implement their shared mission and vision for their schools and students. Principals and school counselors should identify agreed-upon job descriptions, duties, and expectations to eliminate potential role confusion and animosity. As a result of the findings of the research, school counselors would be encouraged to work effectively with principals to promote their comprehensive counseling plans and to deliver their services to students. Additionally, the principal needed to include the school counselors in their leadership teams and encouraged the school counselors to enhance their roles as leaders within the school, communities, and the profession as a whole.

A current review of literature revealed both positive and negative qualities that impacted school counselor and principal partnership which in turned impacted student learning and school culture. The current research study focused exclusively on Kentucky school counselors and principals. It identified both positive and negative qualities that existed in Kentucky schools that enhanced and hindered the school counselor and principal roles. The research linked these qualities of the partnership with student learning and school culture in both a negative and positive manner.



### Chapter 3: Qualitative Methodology

The basic interpretive qualitative research involved a variety of tools intended to answer the research questions regarding the partnership between school counselors and principals and how it impacted student learning and school culture. Chapter three outlined the various methods that were utilized to answer the research questions in this study. While this was not a phenomenological study, it possessed phenomenological elements, as the research focused on the lived experiences of the participants to gain a better understanding of the partnership between school counselors and principals.

According to Paidillia-Diaz (2015), “the word phenomenology derives from the Greek. It has also been defined as the philosophy or school that explains being and consciousness based on the analysis of observable phenomena” (p. 102). Expanding on the term *phenomenology*, Howson asserted, “phenomenology looks at data in order to identify how people view and understand their experiences, or it may look for the stories that people tell about their experiences and what such stories reveal about social relationships and processes” (2018, p. 3).

By using a variety of techniques, I explored the specific elements of the partnership between school counselors and principals that influenced student learning and school culture. The findings allowed me to create a summary of the lived experiences of both the principals and the school counselors as well as the nature of their partnership. It was important to include the voices of the participants in order to provide an accurate picture of the partnership between school counselors and principals. The research highlighted how school counselors and principals were influential in both a positive and negative manners. School counselors were either seen as a student

advocate that implemented researched based programs and services or a school counselor who didn't implement programs and services for their students and operated on a come what may approach to school counseling. The participants utilized the researched used their voices to provide input and supported the research, surveys, and interviews with real-life knowledge about what the partnership between school counselors and principals entailed in a school setting that promoted student learning and the school climate.

### **Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Design and Rationale**

Using the basic interpretive qualitative design construct, allowed me to gain a better understanding of the topic that I was being investigated. Keegan (2009) stated that “qualitative research measures the proportion of a population who think or behave in a particular way” (p. 11). The population on which this research focused on was school counselors and principals and how their roles influenced student learning and school culture. Qualitative research was considered the best method to collect the data, as it permitted the exploration of questions like what, why, and how instead of the quantification of data, which asked about how much or how many, correlation, and causation (p. 11).

Keegan (2009) argued that at the very foundation of qualitative research was the revealing question of why people think and behave as they do (p. 11). Using surveys and interviews allowed me to understand thoughts and behaviors in relation to the partnership between school counselors and principals and how it influenced student learning and school culture. The qualitative research in this study involved small groups

of people, surveys, person-centered, and informal discussion, and data which was referred in terms of “behavior, thoughts, opinions, meaning and the like” (Keegan, 2009, p. 13). The behaviors, thoughts, and opinions of the school counselors and principals were essential to understanding how their roles and partnership influenced student learning and school culture.

Based on Howson’s (2018) approach of using qualitative research in education, the various qualitative research methods were “used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture, or lifestyles through the collecting of information that is typically unstructured” (p. 3). Howson’s definition of qualitative research was very similar to that of Keegan, as they both focused on the behaviors, thoughts, and opinions of participants. Howson (2018) asserted that data could be collected using various methods, such as interviews, surveys, text analysis, observations, and the use of focus groups (p.3).

### **The Qualitative Researcher Lens**

Included in the methodology of a basic interpretive study was positionality. Positionality involved discussing interest in the topic, its role in data collection, and the significant effects it had on data and the data collection process (Bourke, 2014). Barret and Kajamaa (2020) stated that positionality “refers to the research position relative to the research participants or the research context” (p. 10). My interest in this topic was quite simple. As a practicing school counselor and future counselor educator, I worked with principals who valued school counselors and their programs and policies and with those who did not value such a role in their schools. I was interested in understanding

the partnership between school counselors and principals and how it influenced student learning and school culture in either a positive or negative fashion.

I wanted to understand the unique partnership so the qualities and characteristics necessary to improve student learning and school culture could be cultivated. Another goal of my research was to help educate principals and school counselors so they may be able to replicate the positive qualities and characteristics of the partnership to improve student learning and school culture at their respective schools. My role in collecting data was to conduct interviews and surveys with school counselors and principals.

As a novice researcher, I was aware of a potential hazard in the interview process. According to Roberts (2020), beginner researchers asked too many off-topic questions that prevented the interviewer from getting to the core of the conversation. Therefore, it was imperative that I focused on my main questions and used follow-up and lead-in questions. Through conversation with my chair, it was suggested that interviews stay on topic and that I focused on four to six core questions.

I discussed and outlined the key questions asked during the interviews. I journaled my reflections and thoughts throughout the research process as part of the qualitative study. According to Barrett et al. (2020), reflection in qualitative research should be considered goal-oriented, involve collective action, and aim to question, evaluate, and rethink practice (p. 10). Reflecting on processes and outcomes were key to determining themes and codes. I identified potential participants by asking pre-interview questions to determine eligibility. Surveys were administered via listservs and the snowballing technique. Objectivity was maintained and potential biases was

identified to avoid any issues in conducting the research. As a future counselor educator and current adjunct instructor, I applied the potential positive characteristics of the partnership between school counselors and principals to help new school counselors understand how they could create a positive environment for themselves.

### **Personal Experiences**

As a practicing school counselor, I worked under numerous principals who either valued the work of school counselors or did not. I recognized my inherent bias on this topic as a school counselor and have experienced both of these positive and negative situations as a school counselor. Despite my own personal experiences, I adhered to the ethics and standards outlined in the research, which allowed me to expand on some of my personal experiences as a school counselor in working with supportive and non-supportive principals.

I had one principal who lacked total reverence for the position of the counselor. He relegated many non-guidance duties to my office which he did not want to perform himself, such as chairing special education meetings, student supervision, and scheduling. He would often interrupt counseling meetings in my office by opening the office door during a session, knocking on the door during a session, or calling when I was with a student. He would ask questions pertaining to why students wanted to see me in a counseling session and would often ask me to tell him what was revealed in a session, which I never did. He also did not see the value in professional development for school counselors. It became a yearly battle to attend required state conferences and trainings. He stated that students did not need to see a school counselor, they just

needed to stay in class. I had to work very diligently with him to implement my programs and policies. While difficult, we had numerous discussions on the role of school counselors and how they could actually assist him in his goals and objectives for the school. Once I convinced him of this fact, he became more open to the implementation of my programs and to the services available from my office although he was never completely convinced of the role of school counselors in schools.

On the other side of the spectrum, my last principal was extremely open to working with counselors and allowed me to implement my programs and services. She was a former school counselor herself and saw the value of the job and the role of a school counselor. She permitted me to attend my state-required meetings and trainings, encouraged me to go into classrooms to perform classroom guidance, and never interrupted a counseling session and respected the time and space of my office. She encouraged me to pursue my doctorate and would ask how things were going and where I was in the doctoral process. She often assisted me in counseling students and involved me in student situations that she felt needed my counseling services. The previous principal who didn't value the role of a school counselor never referred students to my office for counseling services and lacked the essential knowledge on the role of a school counselor. With my last principal being a former counselor, she understood the job and the complexities of the role and valued the programs and services offered by the guidance office and knew how these services could benefit students and add to school culture.

Having experienced both situations, I can say that the school's principal made or broke the school counselor's programs and services. In upcoming dialogue, it was

shown that it took a building principal to recognize the significant impact a school counselor could have. According to ASCA (2012), school counselors, if allowed to implement their comprehensive guidance program, impacted significantly student learning, increased student attendance, and decreased discipline issues within the school. Finally, regardless of who I worked with, I believed that I provided the guidance services needed for my students and implemented policies that eliminated barriers to student learning which was based on data and the needs of the school and students.

### **Selection of the Participants and Setting**

The basic interpretive qualitative approach was used and participants were identified to take part in the interviews using various methods, including personal contacts, emails, and the internet. Participants were interviewed about their perceptions of the partnership between school counselors and principals. I selected participants who were members of the school counseling profession and principals in Kentucky. I recruited a sample of at nine participants for the interviews. These participants were identified through professional contacts and referrals. Additional participants were sought if the interviews did not provide saturation.

Koenig (2019) listed several steps in selecting participants for a study. These steps included having a list of characteristics for the participants, taking a sample of the participants who meet the selection criteria, identifying a space to meet the participants, requesting from the participants other people who might participate in the study, contacting others in the field who could suggest other people who could participate in

the study, and finally, identifying participants who do not meet the inclusion criteria and excluding them from the study.

Utilizing these steps allowed me to create a pool participants to interview for the study. It enabled me to use an objective method to include participants and to eliminate those who did not reflect the intent of the study. I limited the search to participants who had a minimum of one-year experience in their position in Kentucky as either a school counselor or principal. Other characteristics included age, gender, professional background, and counseling theories were not considered in selection of the participants. The additional data collected was used only as demographic information instead of being part of the formal selection process.

The interviewees underwent a pre-interview session to determine whether they fit the inclusion criteria for the study. Those who did not fit the criteria were excluded. Additionally, although not a requirement for the study, I attended to include a wide diversity of participants, which included school counselors and principals from urban and rural schools, affluent and impoverished schools, as well as monoculture and multicultural schools. In Appendices E and F, the invitation to participate letter and the informed consent form for participating in the research study were provided to all participants.

## **The Interview**

As noted by Paidilla-Diaz, “the most appropriate data collection strategy for phenomenological research is the profound interview” (2015, p. 102). I conducted interviews with the participants and transcribed their responses. The phenomenon or



lived experience on which I focused on was the partnership between principals and school counselors and how it improved or impeded student learning and school culture.

Identifying the key ideas and themes were essential in analyzing the interviews. According to Brott and Myers (1999), identifying core categories through interviews helps to reveal patterns and behaviors that permitted the comprehension of key elements of the research topic—in this case, the partnership between school counselors and principals. Through my interviews with the school counselors and principals, I contextualized their partnership experiences to gain a better understanding of what worked and what did not work in their professional partnership in schools.

As previously mentioned, the interviews were used to gain a better understanding of the partnership between school counselors and principals. The use of qualitative interviewing “has today become a key method in the human and social sciences, and also in many other corners of the scientific landscape such as education and the health science” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 1). Conducting interviews among school counselors and principals generated insights into their unique partnership. The participants’ responses provided through the interviews were analyzed and coded. Themes and common ideas were identified so that a more in-depth perspective could be created to determine what worked well between school counselors and principals and what did not.

For many qualitative researchers “interviewing has become the central resource through which the social sciences and society engage with the issues that concern us” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 1). Using the art of the interview, yielded rich conversations that

were reviewed and analyzed to produce common elements. These “conversations are therefore a rich and indispensable source of knowledge about personal and social aspects of our lives” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 3). I used the data obtained from the interviews to reveal what made their partnership work as well as obstacles that impeded the partnership. After reviewing the interviews and analyzing the responses, a description was formulated about the partnership between school counselors and principals and how they worked together in positive or negative situations. The interviews provided objective ideas about what the person was trying to convey in their responses. I used the interviews to allow participants to be candid in their communication about their experiences with their counterparts and focused on the main research question of this study.

Despite some criticism “that qualitative is too subjective, one might argue given the picture of the conversational reality painted here that qualitative interviewing is, in fact, the most objective method of inquiry” (Brinkmann, 2013, p.4). The interviews spoke for themselves with very little interpretation on my part. The goal was to let the words stand by themselves and allowed the words to identify key themes to code for further investigations. My analysis of the data yielded an unbiased look into the partnership between school counselors and principals and the main protocol question of this research.

## **Surveys**

Nine participants were interviewed, and surveys administered to people who could provide additional input on their lived experiences as a school counselor or school

principal. Surveys were distributed through listservs hosted by the University of Kentucky listserv system. There were numerous listservs available pertaining to potential candidates to complete the surveys. The listservs included populations such as school principals and counselors. Harden (2019) emphasized that using surveys can easily help generate information from a sample population or group. The information obtained from the surveys was used to portray the responses and draw conclusions in particular subject areas. Additionally, the qualitative survey in this research was administered to help answer the question of how the partnership between school counselors and principals could impact student learning and school culture (Harden, 2019).

Survey data was also used to help ascertain certain specific attitudes and beliefs about a particular subject. According to Wienclaw (2019), surveys can be conducted in two different ways: as a questionnaire or within an interview. I used the survey as both a questionnaire and potential guiding questions in the interview as needed to gain a broader understanding of the research question. Participants in the interviews were encouraged to take the survey, or questions from the survey were sometimes used during the interview process as side questions or follow up questions. As part of the interview process, participants who participated in the survey provided additional information that were not overtly covered in the interview.

Kelley et al. (2003) believed that using the art of the survey in qualitative research allowed data to be collected in a standard form, one which allowed for a snapshot to be made about how things were at a specific moment in time. Furthermore, Kelley et al. noted that surveys could be used to explain a situation and to help describe

a particular moment that was being researched (2003). The surveys allowed me to portray how school counselors and principals worked together in either a positive or negative manner. I was also able to determine from the surveys whether any information or evidence of the data analysis supported or refuted any of the information I gathered during the interviews.

Farrell (2016) indicated some guidelines to follow when performing surveys. Qualitative research allowed for the use of open-ended questions, which permitted the participants to add information that provided important insights into the research and generated feedback that may not be as easily gathered through quantitative means. Ferrell (2016) spoke of ways to better facilitate qualitative surveys, including testing the surveys, writing neutral questions, using open versus closed questions, writing very decisive directions, and defining terms, if needed, for the participants. The survey conducted in this research used open-ended questions, were very clear in the directions, and allowed the participants to request more information, if needed, to complete the survey.

One of the most important parts of the survey was the closing question. Asking an open-ended question, such as “what else would you like to add that was not covered in the survey?” allowed participants to reveal information that shed light on other topics that I might not have considered. Sowicz et al. (2019) believed that closing questions “may allow research participants time to reflect, share additional information and decompress” (p. 1). The closing question of the survey permitted the participant to offer information that may be sensitive and confidential and which may not have been covered in the original survey questions (Sowicz et al., 2019).

Participants in this research were encouraged to take part in the survey by answering 7–10 questions sent to them via email. The information gained was used to help answer the research question, which was how partnership between school counselors and principals influenced student learning and school culture. Some internet surveys in other research topics encouraged participants to complete the survey by entering them into a drawing or a lottery for a gift certificate or item. While this may be a good motivation for some researchers, it was not utilized in this research.

Identifying participants to take part in the survey was very similar to identifying participants for interviews. They needed to be or have been a practicing school counselor or principal with a minimum of at least one year of experience in Kentucky. There was not a pre-screened interviews of participants for the survey since it was sent via listserv on the University of Kentucky system. Snowball sampling was also utilized for this survey. There was a link on the survey that requested survey participants to send to other interested parties who might want to complete the survey and could provide valuable input be contacted. Participants were also encouraged to send the link directly to colleagues and peers who may not be on the listserv system. While using snowball sampling increased survey participation, it distorted some of your data pertaining to who participated. According to Sowicz et al. (2019), using snowball sampling as a possible recruitment strategy prevented the researcher from acquiring an accurate count of how many emails were sent out and thereby prohibits the researcher from obtaining an accurate response rate and not knowing who may have completed the survey.

According to responses in the surveys, some school counselors were identified as being part of their school's administrative team who provided input and advice, and

introduced policies which impacted student learning and school culture. The policies and procedures the school counselor implemented as part of the leadership team impacted students and staff of the entire school. According to CACREP, it is considered appropriate practice for school counselors to be viewed as school leaders and implement systemic change within their programs and the services they provide. Standards within CACREP dictated the role of school counselors in this process. According to CACREP, school counselors were “seen as leaders, advocates, and systems change agents in P-12 schools, school counselors’ roles in school leadership and multidisciplinary teams, and (have) qualities and style of effective leadership in schools” (CACREP, 2016, p. 32). The survey results helped catalyze changes within the school counseling program and allowed school counselors to use the results to be students advocates for their role and impacted students within their schools.

### **Transcription, Coding, and Analysis**

After conducting the interviews with selected participants, a transcription service was used to transfer the interviews to written form. Charmaz (2008) expressed the viewpoint that “qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight” (p. 29). Interviews allowed me to begin the coding process and identified themes and concepts. Guetzow (1950) defined coding as follows:

Transformation of qualitative data obtained in interviews, autobiographies, free-answer questions, projective materials, and typescripts of group meetings into a

form which renders them susceptible to qualitative treatment constitutes coding. (p. 57)

The transcription and coding process facilitated the identification of commonalities and differences among the interviewees and their responses. Transcription and coding also permitted for the identification of key terms and concepts as brought up in the interview process. These terms and concepts led to other topics that were not initially noticed in the original interview but were highlighted during the transcription process.

Transcription enabled transparency in the research process. Avoiding personal bias was extremely important for maintaining the validity of the findings of the transcription process. According to Skukauskaite (2012), “transparency in transcribing and in revealing theoretically coherent and systematic ways of transcript construction becomes a ground for uncovering socially constructed interpretations and representations of the world in which people live” (p. 24). Transcribing the interviews helped to generate theories based on the lived experiences shared in the interviews. Therefore, accuracy in the transcription of interviews, was important for reliably highlighting potential themes.

According to Vaughn and Turner (2016), “one of the greatest challenges of conducting qualitative research is determining what is worth analyzing. Coding along themes and topics can help highlight priorities and provide focus to the process of analyzing qualitative data” (p. 50). Coding during my research allowed me to prioritize what was important to the analysis and what was not. More specifically, coding revealed what worked in the partnership between school counselors and principals and what did not. Coding involved many steps intended to aid in the analysis of qualitative

data. Guetzkow (1950) described “the coding process of qualitative data involves two operations, that of separating the qualitative material into units, and that of establishing category-sets in which the unitized material may be classified” (p.47). I categorized the qualities into sets based on what worked and what did not work between school counselors and principals. Coding allowed me to see points that seemed relevant and interesting to the essential research question of the study. Further analysis of the categories helped prioritize the most important behaviors that promoted or hindered the duties of school counselors and principals specifically within the context of their partnership, roles, communication, and proximity to each other.

### **Journaling and Reflexivity**

Additional data points were employed in this basic interpretive qualitative study by utilizing journaling and reflexivity. I journaled throughout the process of conducting the research and used the technique of reflexivity. Barret et al. (2020) believed this is a “continual process of engaging with and articulating the place of the researcher and the context of the research” (p. 9), adding that “reflexivity is an ongoing process that involves reflection to shift our understanding and social realities” (p. 10). Keeping a journal and being reflexive allowed constant reflections on what the data was revealing to me. Reflexivity also permitted continuous reflections on my role as a researcher and on the data obtained by the surveys and interviews and created a social reality pertaining to the roles of school counselor and principals.

The use of journaling and reflexivity was an ongoing process. An interview one day led me to a particular concept but on another day, another survey led me in an



opposite way on another concept. Reflexivity allowed for the continuous reflection and understanding of the data presented in any given day. Reflexivity was very important when it came to qualitative research. It allowed me to clear up my own biases, prejudices, and positions (Barrett et al., 2020). As a practicing school counselor, my own biases obviously led to advocating for the role of school counselors. However, using the art of journaling and reflexivity permitted me to introspectively understand the role of a school principal and how it either aided or hindered the role of a school counselor. Barrett et al. (2020) stated that it is important to keep a research diary, to tell the story of one's research, to inform the reader of one's interpretations, and to continually reflect on one's own position pertaining to the research. Journaling also helped to avoid biases and to prevent the intrusions of personal opinions about the research topic and ensured a more objective and clear understanding of the findings.

The journaling process mitigated such issues in the analysis of data. As I journaled, I remained continually reflexive, constantly reflecting on the participant responses on both surveys and interviews. Miller (2017) believed that journaling “encourages reflection of self that leads to development and growth of judgment, personal values, and critical thinking skills” (p.39). Journaling and the art of reflexivity permitted me to continuously reflect on my role as a researcher and my interpretation of the data from interviews and surveys. Miller (2017) further believed that journaling “encourages critical thinking, value development, and expression of feelings and deepens learning experiences” (p. 41).

## **Potential Limitation**

In a qualitative study, there were always limitations to the research and its processes. One such limitation was the previous relationships with some of the participants. I was very cautious to prevent any personal relationships that I had with participants from influencing my interpretation of the data. Being aware of this fact was important to addressing the potential limitation of the research. While not all interviewees were personal contacts, it was important to acknowledge that several participants were acquaintances, friends, or co-workers, due to the fact that I have been part of the Kentucky school system for many years.

A further limitation was if the interview questions did not pertain directly to the research topic. Obermeyer (1997) believed that “qualitative methods that are based on asking individuals about their behavior and motivations do not always resolve the frequent dissonance between statements, perceptions, and reality” (p. 815). The interviewees could provide inaccurate information, such as telling me what they think I want to hear or not being completely accurate in their responses. I was careful to review the interview responses to ensure that there were not any potential inaccuracies or embellishments of their answers to the best of my ability.

Obermeyer (1997) believed that some qualitative researchers can fall into the pitfall of trying to quantify their research findings by applying non-qualitative research methods in their study. “Qualitative analyses can include quantification and rely on statistics; indeed, in recent years the statistical analysis of qualitative data has expanded in scope and sophistication” (p. 814). It would be inappropriate for me to format my research in this way. While there were some limited scattering of quantitative analysis,

the research was mainly based on quantitative methods to achieve the answers to the research questions and topic that was being studied.

Another limitation to interviewing as a qualitative method was interviewer bias, about which Weinlaw (2014) stated “occurs when the individual administering the interview has certain expectations, beliefs, prejudices, or other attitudes that may affect the interview process and the subsequent interpretation of data” (p. 2). As stated earlier, every effort was made to prevent biases and prejudices in the research, such as using journaling and input from my committee. Self-awareness during the interviews was also critical to avoid leading the participants to a particular conclusion instead of allowing them to come up with their own conclusions. I purposefully focused on my tone and inflections when it came to asking the interview questions as to not lead the interviewee toward a different answer which may have been the opposite of what they were trying to say.

The qualitative study that was conducted investigated the lived experiences of school counselors and principals. The research question focused on how school counselors and principals worked together to influence student learning and school culture. Connecting the resulting data and interpretation to charts and formulas was considered inappropriate in this investigation. While further analysis of the roles of school counselors and principals could have a relationship to test data, that was not the current research focus. Future discussion and analysis could be used to determine if there was a correlation or causation of the data of the research and how it could impact topic of the study and the relationship between school counselors and principals and how their partnership aided or hindered student learning and school culture.

## **Ethical Considerations**

According to ASCA (2016), I followed my own set of guidelines and ethics to “promote awareness of school counselor’s ethical standards and legal mandates regarding confidentiality and the appropriate rationale and procedures for disclosure” (p. 2). Regardless of my capacity to work as a school counselor or researcher, I adhered to all ethics of my profession. I completed the required IRB training through Eastern Kentucky University, which also covered ethics and best practices in research.

Every effort was made to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Roth and Unger (2018) defined confidentiality as the “researchers know the identity of the participants but commit to not revealing the person’s participation and identity” (p. 8). Confidentiality and limitations to confidentiality were extremely important to acknowledge so that the participants felt they could be completely honest and open in their interview responses. Participants felt that their confidentiality was being protected and that only non-confidential information was disclosed in the analysis of the data.

All participants in the study were informed about the study purpose and procedures as well as all relevant ethical issues. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assured of the safety and security of their participation. The information regarding confidentiality and safety was outlined in the informed consent form (see Appendix F), which the participants read and signed prior to participation. Lastly, participants were informed that they had an “out” from the study which helped them to provide more truthful responses without fear of adverse consequences from their employers (Bourke, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

At this point, I presented an introduction to my research topic on the partnership of school counselors and principals and how both roles worked together impacted student learning and school culture. Throughout the study, I investigated the qualities that both positively and negatively impacted on these roles. I focused mainly on these roles in Kentucky with possible future research expanding outside of the state. As a current school counselor and future counselor educator, I wanted to investigate this topic to help cultivate the positive qualities that enhance the partnership between school counselors and principals and help other future school counselors build upon this foundation to help facilitate student learning and the creation of an engaging school culture.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

Since the advent of school counseling at the beginning of the 1900's and with the positions of vocational counselors added to schools during this time period, there has been an ongoing debate on what was the appropriate role for school counselors in public education. Along with their role identification within the schools, a longstanding question has been how school counselors work with their direct supervisor, their principals. The role confusion and identification of a school counselor has lasted for more than a hundred years and has undergone many metamorphoses in what tasks school counselors were able perform. As a current school counselor, I wanted to explore this partnership and role descriptions in schools with a direct focus on schools in Kentucky. In addition, the research explored how principals in Kentucky see their school counselor's role and how that role influenced the goals and objectives that the principal has for their school.

Although there was literature to suggest the role confusion and partnership between principals and school counselors at the national level, I researched these topics of school counselors in Kentucky. I have been involved in school counseling in Kentucky since the early 2000s and have taught as an adjunct at Eastern Kentucky University in the Department of Clinical Therapeutic Programs. As an adjunct, I have taught numerous courses involving developmental guidance, ASCA National Model, child and adolescent counseling, practicum, and internship. I have worked with future school counselors in many forms and I wanted to explore this topic as it was related to Kentucky school counselors and principals and how they worked together to improve

school culture and how this unique partnership can impact student learning and achievement.

The purpose of the basic qualitative study was to examine the qualities of the partnership between school counselors and principals and how the qualities impacted school culture and student learning. Various methods were used to obtain information for this study which involved surveys and interviews with both school counselors and principals. The study utilized nine interviews of a variety counselors and principals at various stages of their careers. The participants ranged from novice beginners to seasoned veterans and retired staff. Additionally, a survey was sent out via the University of Kentucky list-serve related to principals and school counselors. Approximately 20 responses of a survey were obtained again from a variety of principals and school counselors in various stages of their careers. The participants' unique experience in Kentucky provided for a rich insight into this topic to speak about the qualities of the partnership between school counselor and principals. As a doctoral candidate at Eastern Kentucky University, I adhered to the core CACREP standards of research and scholarship which encouraged research in qualitative design and analysis, promoted emergent research practices and processes, and encouraged research questions appropriate for professional research and publication, (CACREP, 2016). It was the focus of this qualitative basic interpretive study to add to the academic discussion on the topic of school counselors and principals' partnership and how that partnership impacted student learning and school culture in Kentucky.

## **Method**

As a current school counselor, I investigated the unique partnership between school counselors and principals in Kentucky. After the data was collected via interviews and surveys, the results were coded and several themes began to unfold. As a consequence of the study, three major themes seemed to emerge including the following 1) the relationship of both interpersonal and proximity between the school counselor and principal, 2) the roles of the school counselors and principals, 3) and how the unique partnership impacted student culture and student learning within the school environment.

A basic qualitative research design was selected to gain further insight into these research questions that allowed for the participants' to be heard. The participants were given their informed consent of the research study and were guaranteed confidentiality for their answers. The confidentiality of the participants allowed them to speak freely and truthfully on the research topic. Through the interviews and surveys, confidentiality allowed participants to answer the research questions without fear of retribution and they answered in an honest and open atmosphere. Additionally, the surveys provided a separate and additional data point that usually supported the interview process but several outliers were noted. I went in depth on how the process was conducted and outlined in a way that would allow a reader of the research to fully understand the process and scope of the data and an understanding of the questions and results of the study.



## Research Questions

I focused on the following protocol questions that were used in the interviews. The questions were designed to help gain a better understanding of the qualities of the partnership between school counselors and principals in Kentucky and addressed either the richness of this partnership or the lack thereof within the school. After the first interview with Participant one, it became apparent that many of the questions were similar in nature and were provoking similar responses compared to the other questions. Therefore, the research questions were slightly revised to look deeper into the research topics and to illicit a varying degree of responses. After reflecting on the previous research questions and answers from the first interview and consulting with the chair of this dissertation study, the research questions were edited to a small degree for clarification. The following are the original research questions in italics compared to the updated and edited versions after interview one.

*1a. What are the qualities and characteristics of the working environment of the school counselor and principal that enhance student learning?*

1b. What are the qualities and characteristics of the physical working environment of the school counselor and principal that enhance student learning?

*2a. What qualities and characteristics do the school and principal have that allow for such a beneficial working environment?*

2b. What personality qualities and characteristics do the school and principal have that allow for such a beneficial working partnership?

*3a. How does the school counselor and principal work to cultivate their environment to enhance student learning?*

3b. How does the school counselor and principal work to intentionally cultivate their partnership to enhance student learning and school culture?

4a.. *What qualities and characteristics are an impediment to the development of a beneficial partnership between the school counselor and administrator?*

4b. What qualities and characteristics can you think of that could be an impediment to the development of a beneficial partnership between the school counselor and principal?

5a. *How does having a poor partnership between the school counselor and administrator limit student learning in their school and negate a positive school culture?*

5b. To what extent does having a poor partnership between the school counselor and principal impact student learning and school culture?

The interview protocol questions were designed to explore the lived experiences of the participants and to explore their phenomenological experiences in their prospective roles in the state of Kentucky. The study results were examined to explore these experiences and how they either helped or hindered the partnership between school counselors and principals. A review of the surveys revealed additional pertinent information in addition to the interview analysis which were coded to reveal pertinent themes of the research.

The surveys were sent out to various list serves housed within the University of Kentucky list serve system. The survey was sent out to approximately a hundred principals and school counselors with a completed survey rate of 20. The survey included one multiple choice question and six open-ended questions to allow for more

flexibility for participants to elaborate in their answers. The multiple-choice question was a Likert scale question, measuring how much the participants agreed or disagreed with the statement of the importance of the school counselor and principal partnership. Some of the open-ended questions included but were not limited to (1) How would you describe your school culture? (2) What would you say either hinders or fosters school culture? and (3) What other information would you like to add in this survey related to the research topic? The questions will be discussed and analyzed further in this chapter and a copy of the survey is located in Appendix (D).

As was expected with qualitative research, I described step by step the process in which data was collected, analyzed, coded, and used in descriptions of how the lived experiences, illuminated the over-arching research question: How the partnership of the school counselor and principal impact school culture and student learning. The basic qualitative method seemed most appropriate to use and gained the information needed for the research. Further analysis of the research discussed participants' backgrounds, conditions under which interviews were conducted, and how surveys were collected. Participants' confidentiality was enforced and protected and all participants were given a copy of the informed consent to sign. The informed consent was enforced to ensure the validity/trustworthiness of the research over the course of the data collection and analysis phase.

The interviews and surveys were coded over three rounds to provide me with a different lens to look at the research after each round of coding. I wanted to see what were the obvious topics coming to light as the surveys and interviews were read and analyzed. After concepts were identified there were obvious data that leaped out of the

research in both the surveys and interviews. After a second round of coding it revealed a number of differences and similarities among the data which were color coded in the actual interviews and surveys. Finally, the last round of coding revealed potential and developing themes from the research which fell under three major over-arching themes: (1) the partnership and proximity which exists between school counselors and principals, (2) the role of the school counselor within the school, and (3) the environment and relationship in which the school counselor and principal work. These themes were explored under the lens of how a Kentucky school counselors or principals would answer the protocol questions and surveys for the study.

Chapter 4 focused mainly on data collection, analysis, and findings of the data in this qualitative study. A deeper reflection of the results were discussed in this chapter which is focused on the unique partnership of school counselors and principals in Kentucky and how that relationship impacted student learning. After nine interviews and 20 survey responses, a beginning picture began to emerge on the research topic. Furthermore, the data obtained in this research showed themes in Kentucky and how they related to national data and trends in the concept of school counselors and principals relationship. In Chapter 5, a focus on future consideration of the research and possible additional topics were explored for potential research on how this topic impacted so many school systems in Kentucky regarding school counselors and principals' relationship. Ideally, the data analysis could eventually be used to not only influence Kentucky educators but school counselors and principals across the nation.

## **Data Collection**

As a current school counselor for 20 years in Kentucky, I brought the unique approach of my own lived experiences of the partnership between school counselors and principals to the study. However, those lived experiences have been put aside to dive deeper into the research provided by the basic qualitative method of study of using interviews and surveys to gain other insights. As noted before, the unique approach to this topic was to exclusively focus on the Kentucky lived experience of these two vital roles in a school system which could impact national trends and data points.

As with any basic qualitative research, the first three chapters focused on an introduction to the dissertation, discussion of literature review, and the research methodology of the study. IRB approval was granted prior to data collection to ensure the safety and wellness of the participants. I agreed to all of the safety components of the IRB approval and followed the strict guidelines of any qualitative basic research study. Although it took two semesters to collect the data, the research showed a wide variety of participants from various professional backgrounds giving their input on the research questions. The data collected and analyzed could have significant input on the relationship of school counselors and principals in Kentucky and how it could impact student learning and school culture.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

The research design incorporated interviews and survey input. The surveys were sent out via emails to the list-serve of both school counselors and principals through the list serve system housed at the University of Kentucky. In addition to answering the

surveys, the beginning of the surveys included an informed consent question prior to the participants' answers. The surveys and the informed consent attached to the survey can be found in the appendices of this research. (“Appendix D,” “Appendix F”)

Interviews were conducted according to the approved the IRB proposal but due to Covid-19 restrictions they were conducted within the context of Eastern Kentucky University policy related to Covid-19. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, some interviews were conducted via Zoom to allow for a safe distance if the participant did not want to do an in-person interview. A meeting link was created and sent out to the participant so they could participate in an electronic fashion. Several of the participants were comfortable meeting face-to-face to participate in the interviews despite Covid-19 fears. The participants were identified via personal contact or word of mouth from other sources who recommended them to be considered for this research using a process known as snowball sample (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 87). The use of snowballing was also used in gaining evidence for this protocol via the surveys. The surveys were sent out to the list serve of the University of Kentucky but several respondents forwarded the survey to other people in which they felt would benefit from their participation on the research. Also, during the interviews, one of the participants encouraged me to interview their principal to gain a better understanding of their working relationship. The three major criterion of participation in the interviews and surveys were to have at least one year of experience in their role as a school counselor or principal, have their experience in the state of Kentucky, and to hold a state licensure certificate in their role of either school counselor, principal, or both.

## **Participant Demographics**

Over the course of nine interviews and 20 surveys, the participants had an experience range in their roles, ranging from one year to over 20 years. Participants' roles ranged from school counselor, assistant principals, and head principals and several participants served in both roles of school counselor and moved up to either assistant principal, principal or superintendent. Included in the participant pool were active school counselors and principals, a former superintendent who was also a principal who supervised school counselors, and a retired principal of nearly 20 years of experience working with school counselors.

All of the participants met or exceeded the criterion to participate in this qualitative study. Several participants also had additional degrees and certification within the public-school system such as superintendent, pupil personnel, assessment coordinator, and behavioral coaches. Included in the pool of participants were a wide variety of people that performed various roles within their school system.

All participants had a least one year of experience in their role as either school counselor or principal in Kentucky and all held professional certification for their assigned roles. The Kentucky Educational Standards Boards was the state licensure agency in charge of validating certifications and degrees for anyone working in public education in Kentucky. All participants had a Kentucky license approved by the KPESB to serve in their role at the time of their interviews or participation in the survey. In the state of Kentucky, as in most states, in order to perform the role of school counselor or principal, one must hold an additional educational, advanced degree or certification in that field which they are certified. For example, I gained my undergraduate degree in

elementary education but had to obtain a master degree in secondary school counseling in order to perform in that role. All of the participants obtained their degree from an institute of higher education by attending schools such as Eastern Kentucky University, University of Cumberland, Morehead State University, and the University of Kentucky to name a few.

Participants were asked at the beginning of the interview the two basic questions of the screening tool which were 1) do you hold a certification in your role as school counselor or principal and 2) have you served in your role for at least one year in Kentucky? Once those questions were answered in the affirmative, the interviews took place and the participants were asked the five-protocol question. While the interviewees underwent a preliminary screening, the surveys did not have that invested, screening process in place. The surveys collected pre-screening information on the identification of their role within their school system and had the participants to provide a Kentucky school email which validated their employment in the state of Kentucky and within their school district. Again, the participants met all requirements aligned in the researcher's IRB proposal and allowed the participants to answer the basic qualitative protocol questions of how the partnership of school counselors and principals added or hindered school culture and student learning in Kentucky.

### **Validity**

Any qualitative research could have the potential be open to many subjective conclusions. It was important to have in place systems that ensured the research



methods, questions, and results were valid. Kvale (1996), a renowned expert in qualitative research, stated that validity in research:

Is sound, well grounded, justifiable, strong, and convincing. A valid inference is correctly derived from its premises... validity pertains to the degree that a method investigates what is intended to investigate... within the wider conception of validity, qualitative research can, in principle, lead to valid scientific knowledge. (p. 238)

Therefore, I included several steps to ensure that my own feelings, thoughts, biases, and opinions were not being intertwined in the research results. One of the first steps for me was to have an open and honest communication with their chair. Meeting regularly, asking questions, and posing potential validity issues was paramount in avoiding personal input in the research. Another step was to keep a journal to reflect upon the interviews and surveys that were conducted during the research. The journal, while not the traditional journal in a sense, included post it notes and narratives scattered throughout the coding process of items I needed to further reflect upon or allow for questioning on items that came as a result of the interviews and surveys. Finally, I spent many intentional hours to be careful to not impose my own thoughts and opinions into the research. Although, there would be a time to do so later for me to include my own personal thoughts, it would not be appropriate at this time doing the analysis phase of this research study.

Continuing with Kvale's concept of validity, the author stated that validity occurs in seven stages,

- 1) Thematizing- depends on the theoretical presuppositions of the study and the logic of the derivations from the research theory.

2) Designing-depends on the adequacy of the design and the methods used for the subject matter and purpose of the study. (A valid research design involves beneficence, producing knowledge beneficial to the human situation while minimizing harmful consequences.

3) Interviewing-Pertains to the trustworthiness of the subjects' reports and the quality of the interviewing itself.

4) Transcribing-A valid translation from oral to written language is involved in the choice of linguistic style for the transcript.

5) Analyzing-Pertains to the fact if the question is put to an interview text are valid and whether the logic of the interpretation is sound.

6) Validating- Reflected judgement as to what forms of validation are relevant to a specific study.

7) Reporting- Involves the question of whether a given report is a valid account of the main finding of the study as well as the role of the reader to validate the reporting results. (p. 237)

### **Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted over the course of two academic semesters and included nine participants. Participants who agreed to the interviewed met all criterion. They were not sent any questions beforehand and they were given the questions in real time during the interviews. Participants were aware of the informed consent and received information of their protection of confidentiality in the study. After the first participant's interview lasted around thirty-five minutes, a

clarification set of research questions were used to illicit more in-depth and varied responses but the focus and intent of the questions did not change and minor, one-word clarifications were used. After minor editing of the protocol questions (which were addressed previously in this chapter) the average interview times ranged from forty-five minutes to a little over an hour. Participants were told that notes would be taken during the interview and they were more than welcomed to preview the notes if needed. As of to date, no participants have requested to read any notes taken during their interviews.

All interviews were conducted in a very relaxed setting for both the interviewees and myself. There was an attempt both in-person and on-line to initiate a rapport that would be conducive to having an open and honest conversation regarding the partnership of school counselors and principals and how it promoted or hindered school culture and student learning in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

The five protocol questions previously mentioned in this chapter were open ended questions to provide the interviewee the opportunity to have unlimited time to reflect and speak about their lived experiences as it relates to the main research topic of this study. The questions were designed to help provide insight into this important topic in Kentucky so that the information could be used to either further build upon a school counselor and a principal's positive partnership or how their existing and or negative partnership helped to negate school culture and student learning.

According to Kvale (2002), interviewing in qualitative research fell under two concepts, the miner or the traveler. "In the miner metaphor, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metals. Some

miners seek objective facts to be quantified, others see nuggets of essential meaning” (p. 3). In the traveler metaphor contrast, the interviewer is a “traveler on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that leads to subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world” (p. 3). It is the metaphor of the traveler that I identified most in this study. I interviewed (traveled) with the participants and as they told their own lived stories under the overarching research theme of partnership between school counselors and principals in Kentucky and how the partnership improved or hindered student learning and school culture. The traveling metaphor allowed me to walk along-side my participants asking questions every step of the way to gain clarity and insight into their own traveling experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

I have 31 years of experience in public education with 20 of those years as a high school counselor. I enacted several measures to ensure my own biases did not influence the results of the surveys and interviews. As with any qualitative research, I needed to be cognizant of my own biases that I brought to the table. It is important to remain neutral in the research, both collecting and analyzing, which allowed the research to speak for itself. The research educated me on the topic being studied and allowed me to learn various findings which allowed the lived experiences of the ones participating to help me gain a richer understanding of the partnership of a school counselor and principal and how it impacted student learning and school culture. The metaphor of the traveler was a perfect example of how the traveler worked hard to

avoid biases and wanted findings to be trustworthy and useful to others after they were done traveling.

According to Stahl and James, (2020) the qualitative researcher needed to create a “thick description, based on the qualitative research materials”. The authors continued to maintain that trustworthiness in qualitative research is one “of those shared realities, albeit a subjective one, wherein readers are writers might find a commonality in the constructive process” (2020). I utilized various methods to ensure trustworthiness. I used conversation with the chair of my committee to have open and honest dialogue regarding if I had my own biases which I could set aside as went deeper into the collection of data and its eventual analysis. Qualitative research in essence was a constructed reality based on the lived experiences of their participants (2020). These lived experiences were essential to discovering how Kentucky school counselors and principals either worked collaboratively and how these lived experiences impacted student learning and school culture.

Additionally, using dialogue and narration with the chair of the committee to ensure trustworthiness, I also used note taking and journaling to reflect my opinions or insights on the research, I reflected on what was discovered in the research, and participated in constant self-awareness techniques to ensure my findings were not biased in either a positive or negative direction. Self-awareness techniques involved re-reading the interviews and surveys to ensure a total understanding of what was being said which was outlined in participants’ answers. According to Stahl and James, (2020) certain research procedures helped me to engage with the data, created trustworthiness within their research activity, and ensured that my own lived experiences were not influencing

the analysis of the research which was paramount in my qualitative research design and study.

In applying techniques to ensure trustworthiness, another element was added to the concept of trustworthiness by enhancing my own personal relationship with most of his participants. An atmosphere of collegiality was created in each interview which allowed the participants to feel more relaxed and to share with me their own lived experiences without fear or judgement. All interviews were in a very laid-back scenario with me outlining the informed consent of the research process. None of the participants indicated any kind of issues with the actual interview or feelings of discomfort. All the interviews focused on the research questions but at times the participants and I did partake in banter or asked questions about each other's lives. Having been a school counselor for 20 years, I was able to include numerous Rogerian techniques in the interview process to make the participant aware they were in a non-threatening, safe, and non-judgmental environment which permitted the participant to open up and share more about their experiences in their roles. I personally knew all of the interviewees with the exception of one of the principals that was interviewed. The familiarity of the interviewer and interviewee allowed another layer of comfort and safety which provided for a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere for an academic discussion.

## **Findings**

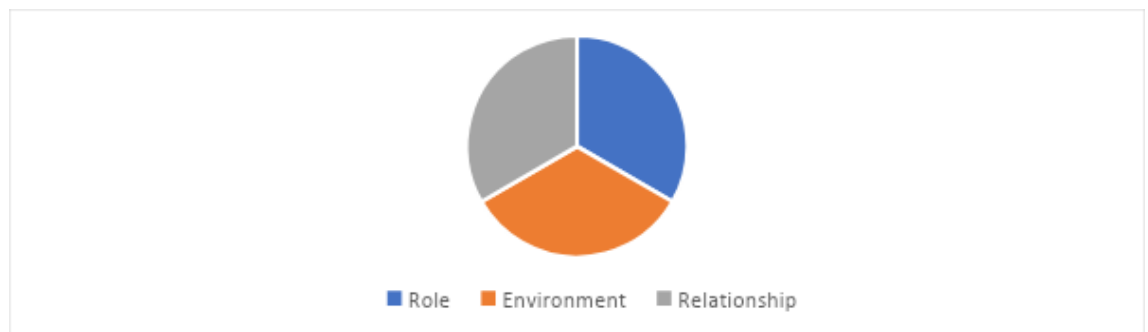
During the interviews, surveys, and data analysis, three themes rose to the attention of the researcher that required further investigation. As seen in Figure 1,

- 1) role of the school counselor and principal.

2) the environment or physical location of the office between the school counselor and principal.

3) partnership between the school counselor and the principal.

In the following discussion, these themes were explored via the interviews and surveys along with my own personal experience on this topic. Analysis was conducted on the findings of the research which were outlined in the following pages under the various headings.



**Figure 1 Main three themes.**

Note. Main themes as a result of the research from interviews and surveys.

### **Theme 1: Role Identification and Confusion**

Throughout the interviews and surveys, role identification rose to the level of a theme within the conversation surrounding the research questions. Numerous participants described the importance of both school counselors and principals knowing the roles defined for each position and how both contributed to the success of the partnership between school counselors and principals. Several participants described situations where they worked in both situations. Participants stated they had worked in an office where school counselors and principals understood each other's roles and

several participants mentioned times where they were in a situation where there were role confusion and ambiguity of what each role expected from the other. The perceived role confusion and lack of understanding led to situations which created mistrust, miscommunication, and poor working environment between the two positions which impacted school culture and student learning in a negative manner.

Participant one was a retired school counselor and principal. They had held numerous roles within the school system and had the unique perspective of seeing these questions from both roles. They were emphatic in believing that role confusion often led to conflict between the two roles. They added:

If I am the school counselor, I have to understand the role of the principal and vice versa. The principal has to understand the role of the counselor. Because I think when I've seen conflicts arise or a lack of collaboration has been when one or the other doesn't understand the roles. So, they have to understand those roles so they can work towards a solution for students.

Continuing this conversation with Participant one, the researcher asked what would the opposite would look like. They stated:

When I had a principal, who respected my role and understood my role as a counselor then when I was going into scheduling and talking to them about what the student needs, compared what the teachers wanted , they (principal) were open and trusted my opinion. When I had a principal that did not understand or respect my roles then my opinion was invalid. It wouldn't push the conversation forward to be student centered.

School counselors held a unique position within the school where they impacted all students in their building. When school counselors and principals understood each other's roles, they appreciated the services that each other promoted in their school. The role of each supported the school's mission and vision and impacted all students in the building. Role understanding was a key element in the surveys and interviews which made the school counselor valued and appreciated in their work. When the



understanding was not apparent between the two roles, the school counselor did not feel as if they were appreciated or understood. In one comment in a survey, a school counselor lamented, “the relationship between principals and the guidance office is not conducive to creating the best space for learning, at the moment the guidance office is not involved in any decision making and are not allowed to make suggestions.” School counselors not invited to participate in decision making led to isolation within their roles, underappreciated feelings, and job performance issues.

However, some of lived experience of the participants had a completely opposite opinion on role understanding and acceptance. According to Participant two, they echoed the importance of understanding each other’s role, albeit informally. They stated:

We had clear expectations for each other’s role and we talked about it. We listened to each other and we talked about what’s the data saying. We saw each other as different function of the same body. There were things she needed to do that only she could do and there were things that I needed to do that only I could do. I was authorized to do certain things and she was authorized to do certain things.

Participants commented on the importance of having this role clarification between the school counselor and principal. In fact, Participant two spoke of specific incidents where they did not have a clear role definition which created a very hostile work environment with the school counselor. They continued to state about the school counselor:

Was not kid centered. It was very negative and very much a struggle. She did not want to go into the classroom. She did not want to counsel the kids. It was very much not a shared vision, not clear roles. I tended to try and have clear roles ...she did not want that. I released her from her role as a school counselor so she could be successful somewhere else. Unfortunately, she passed away three years later due to a heart condition.

As one could ascertain based on the surveys and the participants' interviews in reference to the role of school counselor, role clarification was needed to be outlined and agreed upon by the administrator and the counselor. A clear, concise role was necessary so that each party operated within the agreed upon boundaries and perform the designated work assigned to each other roles. According to Participant two, the lack of role definition led to confusion, unshared school mission, and tension between the two roles. If a school counselor did not support the school principal's mission and vision of the school, it added to a very confused situation which did not support student learning or school culture. In fact, it led to a toxic environment where neither positions wanted to work with each other. In one interview, Participant seven labeled the relationship in this situation as a "cancer" which infected the entire school and culture of the school. The principal in this toxic environment actually told the school counselor to not interfere in their day to day operations. In fact, Participant seven stated the principal would often say:

Stay in your lane. I am the principal. I'll make these decisions staff should not come to you, they should come to me. I'll do this. I'll do that. Even though you're the school counselor, and you want to make sure that you are performing the role of school counselor, we all know that the role of school counselor is very complex, but the principal was like, stay in your lane.

With this participant, the principal was very concerned that the staff would often come to the school counselor for assistance or concerns of the school instead of reporting to him. The principal was very upset with the school counselor because they would be available to the staff when they had questions or concerns. The staff felt they could not go to the principal due to the principal's unapproachable attitude and demeanor. Therefore, the principle took their insecurities out on the school counselor

because the staff felt more comfortable talking to the counseling staff than to the principal. Obviously this made for role confusion between the two and added to the toxic relationship in which the school counselor spoke about and characterized as a “cancer” infecting the school, staff, and culture.

Most of the participants saw the role of school counselor as an advocate for students, families, and staff. The school counselor was often seen as a mediator between school staff and the principal. School counselors were often viewed as the peacemaker within the school who many would go to if they had issues with the administration.

Participant one stated:

Just like school counselor is an advocate for students, a school counselor can be an advocate for teachers as well. They are such an in between. The school counselor is seated in between administration and the classroom. And they are that part that gets the heart pumping in terms of the school culture. Because they are the ones that can really connect the administration and the teacher, the administration and the students, And, when the connection is flawed then you are working over time for no reason.

In a review of the survey results that were solicited via the University of Kentucky list serve, they also echoed the idea of role confusion when it came to school counselors and principals. A majority of the surveys identified the lack of understanding from the school principal of what the school counselor should actually be doing. One survey respondent wrote regarding the role of school counselor:

“the principal did not understand the ASCA National Model. (However) he allowed counselors to be old school and play counselors. He very much wanted us to impact students. We had to do flashy groups with partners and things that were highly visible. He was unaware that we were failing to get to the meat of the counseling program.”

In this scenario, the principal highlighted events and programs that they wanted to get publicize to enhance their own role and how the principal was meeting the needs

of the students but instead wanted the publicity of how great things were going on in their school to appease parents, staff, and stakeholders.

The sentiment of this comment was layered throughout the interviews and surveys. Principals who did not understand the role of a school counselor did not allow the school counselor to do certain groups and programs that in effect, may have made the school and the principal to look effective in their roles. The respondent in the survey continued to advocate for training at the school and district levels:

Principals and district leaders need training on the ASCA National Model. It will never be fully implemented into the schools until they are trained. No matter how many school counselors are trained in it, there will be lazy ones that will revert to the old ways and refuse to implement it.

### **Journal Reflections**

Upon my further reflection, I was reminded of a time numerous years ago, where the course that I was taking at Eastern Kentucky University, had an opportunity to present what school counselors' roles should be in schools. The class was able to present to member of the Pre-K to grade 13 Council on what the ASCA National Model should consist of in their school. The Pre-K to grade 13 committee was made up of principals and superintendents. After the presentation by the EKU class, several of the members of the committee commented on they had no clue on all of the counseling duties a school counselor should be doing in their schools instead of the non-guidance duties many school counselors are relegated to in their districts. In Chapter Five, this sentiment was echoed in national data on the lack of knowledge of school superintendents and principals on their utilization of their school counselors.

Due to the role confusion identified in the interviews and surveys, it was often difficult for school counselors to achieve the benchmarks of the American School Counselor Association. School counselors in Kentucky were routinely assigned tasks that were not appropriate according to ASCA. School counselors in Kentucky were often relegated to roles involving schedulers, disciplinarians, supervision of the cafeteria, and other areas of the school, chairs of the admission and release committees for special education, and many more tasks that ASCA stated should not be the burden of the school counselor. Without clear objectives, goals, and expectations of both the school counselor and principal, the role confusion continued to exist in Kentucky schools.

Referencing my research journal as a school counselor and upon my personal reflection, I had experienced this role confusion first hand. I have been a school counseling in a small suburban school in central Kentucky 20 years. The school has 350 students in the upper grade levels and has a staff of 27 certified and classified staff. Due to the small nature of the school, I wrote and reflected that as my role as a school counselor I had to wear many hats within the school. I had to be tests administrator, scheduler, homecoming dance coordinator, provided supervision for both the cafeteria and student parking lot, directed both special education ARC and 504 meetings, along with being responsible for all cumulative files, transcripts, report cards, and mid-term reports.

My role covered many topics and spectrums of the school. While I felt I had achieved the required direct hours to service students, it still was a challenge due to the many other duties given to me in my school. If a school principal did not understand the

role of the school counselor then, according to a survey respondent it led to “a school culture that was not good and many staff and students did not want to be at school on a daily basis.” In fact, in my own personal experience, a school culture which was considered poor had a high staff absentee rate and even higher staff turnover rate for new staff.

### **Understanding Each Other’s Roles**

The understanding of each other’s roles as a school counselor and principal led to trust between the two roles. When there was role confusion there was the opportunity for miscommunication and mistrust. Participant six stated on this topic:

If the counseling office is communicating one thing to the teachers or parents, and the principal is communicating something differently to the teachers, then I think that it quickly shows to the school community that the counselor and principal are not on the same page. I think it quickly shows the school community the lack of trust, and I think it also adds to the divisiveness within a school community when you have that you see that.

Participant eight spoke about school counselors and their perceived role as a disciplinarian in their school. While school counselors were ethically not permitted to deal with discipline, this particular participant used their role of school counseling for a different perspective and how their principal allowed them to use more counseling techniques and strategies instead of disciplinarian practices. The participant mentioned the “hammer and hug” approach to discipline. Participant eight stated that in order for the hammer and hug approach to discipline be effective, both the school counselor and principal needed to know each other strengths. The participant continued to state:

I think the hammer and hug philosophy is when you are going to be strict with them. You’re going to have that discipline that they need. But you are also to love on them and try to build them up. By having two models (school counselors and principals) in the school that’s not their teachers that’s not getting onto them all

the time, whatever is going on in the classroom., two people that could, that the

students can go to, to get that support or to receive that discipline that they really want. They might not think they do but they do...that's why you have to know each other's strengths and weaknesses and personalities to be able to mesh those and work off each other...but in the end know who is the school counselor and who is the principal in these situations.

Participant eight continued to state that role confusion in this area led to a disaster. While school counselors were not ethically supposed to deal with discipline, the principal and the participant created a team approach that respected each other's roles to accomplish nearly the same outcomes for the students. Both the school counselor and principal understood the roles of each and created a mutual respected partnership that worked for their students, staff, and themselves.

Participant four continued this sentiment of school counselor as a disciplinarian when they stated:

I was always pretty intentional about clarifying that the guidance office doesn't do discipline, this office does support. I think just because that has always been you important to me in my role as a school counselor. I just make sure the best player to my students and families. And my administrator that and appreciated and respected that. And he owned that he was a disciplinarian.

School counselors were not supposed to administer discipline. It was considered unethical for school counselors to hand down discipline or to punish students within the school, (ASCA 2012). However, it was appropriate for school counselors to provide proactive programs to address discipline within the school. It was appropriate for the school counselor to work with students who were having discipline issues in the school to help the student be reflective on their behaviors and to help the student to identify appropriate coping skills to handle future issues to prevent the student from making poor choices when it comes to problem solving skills and conflict resolution.



The philosophy behind school counselors not being used as disciplinarian was rooted in the role of school counselor themselves and their ethics. School counselors were supposed to be judgement free, provide unconditional positive regard, and provide a safe space for students to share their feelings and thoughts in a session. If a student feels as if they are going to be disciplined for what they share in a counseling session, the student did not reveal or shared insights into what makes them behave in the way they are behaving in the school. School counselors needed to be adamant that their role not provide discipline but provided education, techniques, and alternative ways the student can handle themselves when facing a discipline situation in the school.

Participant eight who served under the principal with the hammer and hug philosophy agreed with his assessment of the roles of school counselors and the principal. Both roles stated that they were very intentional of not coming off as a disciplinarian. In fact, during the renovation of their school, the principal and counselor had no control of the counselor and principal's office being together in the same administrative wing. However, they agreed that the counselor office, if had to be in the administrative suite, that the students knew they were two separate entities. In fact, Participant eight stated that the proximity of their office to the principal's was actually a benefit instead of an impediment:

It was very beneficial. We were there together, we were able to really talk about kids and their situations and what was going on. I think we were able to address their needs better just because we were in constant communication with each other.

While this office set up was not very unique, it took the school counselor and the principal to work in unison to ensure that students saw the two roles differently, one as disciplinarian and one as counselor, who were supportive and helpful. In one survey

response, a participant spoke about the other side of the school counselors not having a clarity in their roles with their principals. They stated, “ He, principal, did not understand the ASCA National Model”.

In my reflection journal, it was noted that one day when all of the administrators were out of the building for a meeting, I was left in charge of the building. When a teacher sent a student to the office to be disciplined for leaning back in their chair, I used this incident as an opportunity to educate the student on the dangers of leaning back in their chair. The student was then released to return to class and finish the objective of the day. Later, the teacher approached me to inform me they did not feel supported because the student was allowed to return to class. I asked if the student completed the assignment and did not lean back in their chair. The teacher stated they did and I walked away knowing that I did the correct thing with this student in this particular situation.

School counselors and principals dealt with this role clarification and identification since school counselors became a role within the school. Participant four also echoed these sentiments during their interview. They stated:

Because I think with my role as a counselor, I've always been pretty intentional about clarifying that this office doesn't do discipline, this office does supports. I think just because that always been important to me in my role as school counselor. I just make sure that I can be the best player to my students and families. And my administrator appreciated that and respected that. And he owned that he was the building disciplinarian.

It is crucial that school counselors identified their role within the school building with their administrator. In a majority of interviews and surveys, it was stated that this role clarification was paramount in both the school counselor performing their job and avoided any conflict with their administrator. In one survey response, when asked about

the partnership between school counselors and principals, they stated, “ It worked best when you are a team. Isolated job positions has never gone well in my experience. I valued my principal as much as he valued me.”

In Participant seven’s interview they spoke about the toxicity of her principal’s relationship at another school which she described as a “cancer” within the school. They spoke about the toxic relationship which impacted all aspects of the school, from staff morale, student discipline, and their working relationship with each other. The participant didn’t feel comfortable approaching the principal and avoided the principal at all cost which did not lead to a productive working environment between the two. Participant seven left that position and works now in an elementary school with a principal who is completely opposite of her former principal. They have an open, honest, and ongoing communication to benefit their students each day.

In the role of school counselor several participants mentioned how they would use their role to advocate for their programs and plans. In addition, other participants mentioned how it was very important for the principal to recognize their role within the school. Participant one and Participant four spoke about how they would be introduced to new students by their principals. Both claimed that their principals would introduce them to the new student as someone who was there to help and to assist the student adjust to the new school in whatever fashion or manner. The counselors saw this as a byproduct of their advocacy within their role as a school counselor.

Student advocacy was seen as essential part of the role of school counselor. In fact, Participant four spoke how vital their advocacy was to them performing their job duties. They stated, “ I think the primary responsibility of advocacy lies within the

profession themselves. I should advocate for myself and for my role. That's my responsibility as a professional." Participant four felt that if they were to advocate for their role to their administrators it would lead to an atmosphere of trust and the administrators would value their work as a school counselor. The more comfortable the school counselor felt with the principal and vice versa, the more they would be able to be respected and adhered to their own individual roles. They continued to state that, "the more comfortable the school principal and the counselor were with one another and what those roles needed to look like, it made it easier for the principal to advocate my role to the staff."

Both Participant one and two stated that having the principal advocating for the role of school counselor held make the student more comfortable in approaching the school counselor. In fact, I had numerous experiences where I was in the same situation when meeting new students and their principal proclaiming the services and programs I was able to provide. It made for a better relationship for the student and school counselor especially having the backing of the principal. Showing a unified front to the students was a key component in advocating for the role of a school counselor with their principal. Participant one stated

There were many times that I went to the principal to advocate for a student or to advocate for something that would help student learning. And if I had a principal who didn't respect my opinion or didn't respect my role and just saw me as an assistant to their agenda...it was very difficult to collaborate with that person...an example would be student scheduling. So, when I had a principal who respected my role and understood me as a counselor then what I was going into scheduling and talking to them about what the students need, compared to what the teacher wanted they were open and trusted my opinion.

## **Conclusion of Theme One**

In conclusion of theme one, I understood and accepted my role as a school counselor and it was a critical part in the partnership between the school counselor and principal which impacted school culture. A majority of the participants and surveys spoke in regards of this important understanding that allowed for appropriate inclusion of these roles. Almost every respondent on the surveys, when asked if it is important for school counselors and principals to work together to improve student learning and school culture, rated it as strongly agree. The response of strongly agree to this role understanding was a critical underlying component between school counselors and principals. As evident in comments and responses in the surveys, the role understanding by both principals and school counselors, led to a positive student learning culture and added to the trust, communication, and respect by each other. On the other side, when there was not understanding of each other's roles, then were massive confusion, feelings of unappreciation, and a lack of job identity as school counselor believed they could not implement their ethical services and programs for their students which negatively impacted role understanding, partnership, and school culture.

## **Theme Two: Environment Factors That Influence School Counselors, Principals.**

Although role clarification was a key to the partnership of the school counselor and principal, a parallel theme was uncovered when it came to the actual physical location of the offices of the school counselor and principal and how it impacted student learning and school culture. The location of the guidance counselor's office was either a positive or negative when working with a principal. Sometimes

students saw that having the guidance office near the principal's office would connect them to discipline and not in the counselor's role. In other times, the guidance counselor being next to the administration added to quick communication and action plans to help the student. It was up to the principal and the guidance counselor to make a conscious effort on the location and the use of the guidance counselor's office to either promote their services to students or to continue the image that guidance counselors were part of the discipline team with the other principals. Several participants in this study spoke about the location of their offices and how it impacted their work with students and their principals.

Participant five spoke about the positive qualities of having their office next to the principals by stating that "being close in proximity goes well with working hand in hand. I truly believe if you are going to have success within your building, your principal and guidance counselor have to be cohesive." Participant five continued to speak about the proximity of their offices by adding "our proximity (allowed) us to be able to communicate with one another, to be able to tag team, and to use each other as a resource."

Participant five believed her principal recognized their professional role as a school counselor. They had regular meetings to discuss their professional base and to discuss behavior plans and strategies of interventions for students. Participant five stated that having their offices close in proximity allowed both to discuss student issues and concerns:

The behavior plans that we have in place are discussed to see if they are working for us. Within our building there are certain things we are very strong at and there are certain things that we are working on so we are not spinning our wheels and a lot of energy on things that are not successful.

Participant five continued to discuss how they worked with their principal to benefit the students in their building. They were currently working in an elementary setting but had worked in a middle school before. They spoke that while they were at the middle school, there were times the principals were out of the building and they had to handle discipline. The school counselors were very clear with their students when a discipline issue arose that they were not there to deliver consequences but to talk about the issue at hand and the principal would deal with the discipline side when they returned to school.

The school counselor was adamant that they conveyed to the student that they were not the disciplinarian but would talk to the students about how they could handle the situation in a more positive approach. They would say “What can we do to eliminate this behavior, or what can we do to remedy this, what can we do to fix this, but not from a disciplinary role at all.” Participant five also spoke about reaching out to parents when a disciplinary issue arose and made sure they were aware of the situation to keep the parents in the loop so they would speak to their child about the discipline issue at hand.

### **Proximity of School Counselor and Principal’s Offices**

Participant five’s office was not near the principal’s office in the front. The counselor’s office was actually down the hall a bit so students could have easy access to the counselor. They felt as if the students perceived that they were seeing the counselor and not seeing the principal. Students felt as if it was more open to them and accessible so they could drop by to talk to the counselor. Participant five stated that they felt as if the students perception was that “I’m not seeing the principal, I am seeing the

counselor. I don't have to go into the main office where the principal's office is located." Participant five continued to speak about how they did not want students to be fearful or worried to come see them and felt the location of the guidance office alleviated some of these feelings for students.

On the other hand, Participant six revealed in their interview that the proximity of their office allowed for open and clear communication. Having the principal's office near the guidance counselor's office allowed for both parties to speak about student issues and behaviors. It was seen as a positive, by both counselor and principal, to have their locations near each other so they could have easy access to each other and discuss issues of the day. Participant six stated that having their offices close together was seen as an open-door policy between the two so they can both be on the same page when dealing with students. They stated:

When I was principal, my office was adjacent to the counselor's office and so I think that the proximity was very important for a lot of reasons. I mean number one the counselor had the opportunity to meet with students privately, to meet with parents privately, and even staff members would come and speak to her privately. Having an open communication with my counselor and a close relationship that there wasn't anything going on in the building that I wasn't aware of. Because we worked so closely together we were able to holistically meet the needs of families because the counselor would know a lot of things about the background information about students and families that when she shared that with me, I would use that information to gain an understanding so that we could better service our families.

The interview continued to reveal that the principal saw the counselor as an essential part of their team. They felt like the counselor should be visible. "I think it's important that families see the counselor as an integral part of the building. When families entered the building they not only saw my principal's office in the front but they also saw the counselors office too. I think that it showed what the school valued



and it allowed her to be even more visible.” Participant six truly saw the counselor as a very important part of their team and recognized that by the location of their offices. It allowed them to have better communication and to put forward a student-centered approach when it came to discipline or counseling issues. The proximity of their offices allowed not only communication, but permitted boundaries for students and staff to see that the school counselor was part of the decision-making team. Participant six felt her principal would honor the role of school counselor in their office by allowing them the privacy to do their job. Participant six continued to promote that having the guidance office next to the principal’s office was a good thing:

It goes back in my opinion to communication and trust. Understanding those boundaries, respecting those boundaries. If I saw my counselor’s door closed maybe she was in a small group with students, meeting with teachers, meeting with families. I respected that space and that time. She was able to do her job to its fullest extent because of the boundaries we had for each other. So, while we were extremely close in our information and working together, we also respected each other’s responsibility. I felt that my counselor time was sacred when it came to working with students.

I kept an informal journal on these topics as I have worked as a school counselor of 20 years with numerous principals. Upon reflection of the journal , I was able to ascertain in my experience both scenarios of working with principals that were understanding of their school counselor’s office to others principals who lacked a knowledge of how to conduct themselves within the school counselor’s office and an understanding of the school counselor’s actual job duties.

Unfortunately, I had a principal who did not respect the counselor’s time or space. In fact, many times when a session was occurring, they would knock on the door or actually use their key to open the door to come in. The principal would even come in and ask the student why they were missing class and what their issues were. Obviously

this was not respectful of the counselor's time and would ask the counselor to reveal to him why the student was seeing the counselor. I did not share any information regarding students and would tell the principal that confidentiality rules prevented me from disclosing what the session topics were. While the principal did not like this they did not push the issue. The principal did not respect the role of the counselor and continued to interrupt sessions and ask questions until they left their position as a building principal.

I had to have a conversation with my principal about respecting the privacy and the confidentiality of the guidance session. It was stated to the principal that interrupting a counseling session was very unethical and counter-productive to what the counseling session should include. Students even commented on how intrusive the principal's actions were perceived and asked numerous times that he not be allowed to come into the session. These student comments were relayed to the principal.

Participant four also spoke about the proximity of their offices to the principal's location. It was also conducive to open communication and believed it only enhanced the partnership between the principal and school counselor. While some students saw the counselor's office near the principal's location as a hinderance, several participants discussed how it only increased their relationship with their principal and how it aided in treating students in their counseling sessions. Participant three spoke about the "hammer and the hugs". With their offices being located near each other, they were able to show a united front when working with students either in a counseling session or a disciplinarian situation. Participant four echoed this sentiment in their interview when they stated:

I had offices that were relatively close in proximity to the principal's office. I use to work in an academy model and each academy had a head principal. It was intentional about physically locating both those offices office together, and so we were actually right next door to one another. We had shared conference space that we could utilize for meetings and it allowed us to see each other on a regular basis so even in passing we were able to keep each other abreast of situations, things that we many have done if we were on opposite side of the building.

Numerous participants stated that having their offices near the principal could be both a negative and a positive. While some students saw the counselor's office near the principal maybe as a disciplinarian role, the proximity of their offices actually provided for open communication and prevented any misinformation about students when dealing with issues and crises. The proximity of the offices near each other was seen as a positive by several participants but made it very clear that they communicated with the students about their role as counselor and not as a disciplinarian. It did appear that having an open communication between the school counselor and principal, with their office located near each other, appeared to benefit creating plans for the students and created a positive partnership between the principal and the school counselor and impacted student learning and school culture.

In one of the surveys completed for this research, one participant indicated that the location of the office of the school counselor and principal allowed them to "meet regularly to evaluate the comprehensive school counseling program." Numerous survey participants continued to lament that having a close working environment allowed for them to talk together with parents, students, and staff. The proximity of their offices permitted both school counselors and principals to collaborate and coordinate from everything from scheduling, testing, curriculum, learning platforms, communications, to

restorative counseling and allowed the school counselor and principal to connect together in their supports of their students to prepare them for life after high school.

Participant eight echoed these sentiments about the proximity of the two offices by stating that being ‘physically close allowed them to talk to each other’s roles, different things, you can’t let this be a barrier, if you are not close then you have to get up and to each other’s offices. You can’t let that be a barrier.’” This particular participant refused to allow the lack of the proximity of their offices to be a hinderance to their communication and working relationship. While this particular participant used emails a lot, they stated that any in depth conversations had to be face to face regardless of the location of their offices. When asked if students saw the location of the guidance office near the principal as a disciplinarian situation, they stated that they could understand this perception but it all boiled down to relationships with kids. While their principal’s office was in the front, the guidance office was near the back of the offices, separated to allow students to not associate the school counselor with discipline.

Participant eight spoke about having a relationship with students so they would not have this perception but understood how students could interpret the school counselor as part of the discipline team. They stated:

I think it’s all about relationship you build with kids, it’s certain that students could see counselors in a disciplinarian role but with the location of the offices it was behind my office so it felt separate to them. I can certainly see how some kids would feel like that’s a disciplinarian thing, and I know some principals who use their counselors as disciplinarian but I did not...I saw my counselor as an advocate for students.

## **School Counselor as Student Advocate**

The particular role of a school counselor can often be seen as being a student advocate which came up numerous times during interviews and surveys. School counselors accepted their role with non-guidance duties, but despite these extra duties, they saw themselves as advocates and helped staff and principals to understand the reasons why a student maybe behaving in a way not acceptable to principals and disciplinarian. In one survey response on the advocacy of a school counselor to a principal, they stated they “work in tandem to develop school initiative, processes, and policies to support ALL students.”

In my reflection journal, I related to this comment about school counselors being advocates for their students. Many times, I had to intervene on behalf of the students to the principal in order for the principal to understand the background of the student. My office was semi near the principal’s office so it was easy for me to talk to their principal. While the relationship between the two was not ideal, the principal did at times take time to listen to the background of students before making a decision related to discipline. School counselors, along with myself, would inform their principals of past trauma and incidents that influenced the student’s behaviors. While this was not in any way excuses for their behavior, it allowed for a bit of insight for the principal to make an informed decisions regarding whatever poor choices the student had made.

The physical environment of the location of the school counselor and principal’s office was unearthed as a key element in the relationship of the school counselor and principal. Many of the participants commented that the proximity of the school counselor and principal’s office was very important to the partnership because it

allowed for open communication and quick conversations to be had in stressful situations. In fact, Participant three stated in their interview that the eighth-grade wing had a close proximity of the school counselor and principal's office while in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade wing was just the opposite and there was a noticeable difference between the two.

Participant three, who is current a practicing principal commented:

I think having our offices side by side while were in the same little office suit down on our eighth-grade wing allowed for back and forth communication that was instantaneous. If a kid comes to my office I can easily walk next door and ask the school counselor if they have any issues with the student and the school counselor can do vice versa. You can have these dual roles and work together and having that proximity is vital to that. In dealing with a threat assessment you do before it becomes a major threat assessment you that ability to quickly bring someone else to hear what's going on, to determine the specific issues when dealing with behavior stuff.

The proximity of the school counselor and principals office was a unique theme in my findings. A majority of the participants viewed the location of their offices as a hinderance if it was close to the principal's office due to being connected to discipline. Students would view the school counselor as part of the disciplinarian team and viewed the school counselor not as counselor but as an administrator. Throughout the participants interviews and surveys, when the school counselor and principal offices were close to each other, it took an intentional effort to help the students to not view the school counselor as a disciplinarian. It took a united effort and an understanding of their roles to make sure that both the principal and school counselor conveyed the distinct role identification for their students to help them understand the job duties of each roles within the school. While the closeness of the two offices were seen somewhat as a hinderance, it also allowed for the two roles to have open and honest communication when it came to school policies, procedures, and students.

Participants spoke on the closeness of the offices to each other, which allowed them to have easy access to communicate and work together. It allowed the school counselor and principal to work together to ensure they were all on the same page in regards to the functions and behaviors of the school and its students. Not having this close proximity between the two, allowed for lack of communication, lack of role understanding, and lack of putting students first. In hindsight, while the location of the offices could be seen in both a positive and negative lens, it appeared that through the surveys and interviews, that the final analysis of how this perception of their offices was seen, it took both the school counselor and principal to work hard on maintaining open communication and a better understanding of what each role performs in the school. A further analysis of theme one and two, appeared that the two were connected. The location of the school counselor and principal's office had an impact on each other's understanding of their roles in the building. The closer the offices were together it appeared to help with role clarification of both the school counselor and principal. In one of the survey responses, a school counselor stated:

If principals and counselors do not work closely , we will not be able to effectively help our students reach their potential. If a student is in trouble with a discipline issue, but the school counselor is not aware, issues that are causing the discipline issues may not be addressed. Likewise, if a counselor is aware of extenuating circumstances with a student but does not inform the principal, the principal may administer discipline that would otherwise be different based on the circumstances, had the principal known about them.

One such participant spoke about school counselors as a disciplinarian in their school and how they used the role of school counseling in their disciplinarian practices. Participant four mentioned the "hammer and hug" approach to disciplinarian. The participant stated that in order for the hammer and hug approach to

disciplinarian, both the school counselor and principal needed to know each other strengths. The participant continued to state:

I think the hammer and hug philosophy is when you are going to be strict with them. You're going to have that discipline that they need. But you are also to love on them and try to build them up. By have two models (school counselors and principals) in the school that's not their teachers that's not getting onto them all the time, whatever is going on in the classroom., two people that could, that the students can go to, to get that support or to receive that discipline that they really want. They might not think they do but the do...that's why you have to know each other's strengths and weaknesses and personalities to be able to mesh those and work off each other...but in the end know who is the school counselor and who is the principal in these situation.

Participant four continued this sentiment of school counselor as a disciplinarian when they stated:

I was always pretty intentional about clarifying that his office doesn't do discipline, this office does support. I think just because that has always been you important to me in my role as a school counselor. I just make sure the best player to my students and families. And my administrator that and appreciated and respected that. And he owned that he was a disciplinarian.

## **Conclusion of Theme Two**

In conclusion of this theme, the proximity of the school counselor's office and the principal's was seen by participants as a barrier to student success unless there was an intentional effort to remove the stigma of the location of the school counselor near the principal's office to ensure that students saw the school counselor in their role of student advocate instead of disciplinarian. Without role clarification, an intentional proximity of each other's offices, there could not be a positive relationship between the two roles. It was interesting to note that students felt that the counselor and principal's offices together was a hinderance, but the staff did not. The proximity of each's other offices also added



to the unique relationship between school counselors and principals which was considered theme three and discussed in the following pages.

### **Theme 3: Relationship Between School Counselors and Principals.**

Role confusion and the physical location of the offices were extremely important themes related to the research topic, without these two themes, the last theme would not be able to be achieved. The relationship between the school counselor and their principal was considered paramount for a successful partnership. As previously discussed, if a principal does not understand the role of their school counselor and if their offices are far apart, it would be quite challenging to develop a helpful and beneficial relationship that would impact student learning and school culture. The existing relationship between a school counselor and their principal was so important that it became a significant finding and theme within the research. As a practicing school counselor, I can truly understand the importance of having a positive relationship with their principal. Having experienced both scenarios, good and bad, I had a unique perspective on this issue and how important the relationship was between the two roles.

According to the participants and survey respondents, the relationship between the school counselor and principal was crucial and impacted student learning and school culture. Participant one referred to the relationship between the two roles as a collaboration and stated:

In my job as principal, my understanding was that I could not do my job as a principal with the collaboration and support of my counselor. As counselor my understanding of the relationship was to advocate for the students and the teachers, and to work closely with the counselors to make sure that student learning was at the center of what we did together.

School counselors should be seated at the table and have a voice when important decisions are made regarding curriculum, policies, and procedures. Principals who value their school counselor invites them to be part of the leadership team of the school and seek their input and advice.

In one survey response, they stated that “My principal and I work well together. We know that our relationship must be strong to support the staff and students of our school. My principal sees me as an equal.” The perception of the principal seeing their school counseling as an equal part of their team was an extremely important factor which fostered a working and beneficial relationship between the two. The survey respondent in this context rated their school culture as great. They felt heard and valued in their role as a school counselor and the principal sought out their opinions on day to day activities, curriculum issues, and policies that impacted staff and students.

Another survey respondent spoke about their lived experience regarding their relationship with their principal. They stated that they reviewed test data to make informed curriculum decisions, they discussed scheduling for next year, and they spoke in regards to what is working and what is not working in their relationship which allowed them to bounce ideas off of each other to help improve the student learning and school culture. The sentiment of a positive relationship between the school counselor and principals was echoed throughout the interviews and surveys as being a top characteristic that allowed for an open and honest relationship to better the school and to support the principal’s mission and vision of the school.

A majority of the participants spoke about this unique partnership in their interview and how they either felt respected or not in their roles.. There was one who felt respected in their roles and believed that they were able to implement their counseling services and programs to their students. They felt as if they could hold

individual, group, and classroom counseling sessions. Principals who respected their counselors stated they had a great partnership with their counselors and that they not only respected their school counselor, but trusted them to do their ethical duties to meet the need of all students. Participant eight who was a retired principal stated:

Well I think the relationship has to be strong in order for things to go and get done....I personally know people that have had counselors that they did not feel were good. I never had that. I had great counselors and it took all of us to give hundred percent of the time to get things done. What was best for teachers, kids and best for the school.

The comment from this principal spoke volume on how they treated, respected, and valued their school counselor. Participant eight was a principal in a middle school that would have been deemed underperforming by the Kentucky Department of Education. In their tenure as principal and the partnership with their counselor and staff, the school was lifted out of the lower performing schools in regards to test scores to one of the highest performing schools in the state. The principal in this interview, accredited the relationship with the school counselor as a key component of helping the school meet with success. Participant eight spoke how they were nearly at the bottom of the list of schools in the state during their first year as principal but rose to become a school that many other school staff from other districts came to explore how they could duplicate their success in their own schools. They continued to state how their school counselor had a tremendous impact on the school behavior. They stated:

One of the counselors started out as a social worker and had a million resources, one of them being restorative justice. They created a policy that would require parents to meet after their student was in a fight and had to meet before the student was able to come back to school. I would have never known about restorative justice if it weren't for my school counselor. They had resources, strategies, and approaches I would never know about if it weren't for my school counselor. They (school counselors) picked up on trends that I wouldn't know about such as the impact of social media on students.

School counselors are often seen as the heart, eyes, and ears of the school. They know about upcoming trends in counseling, topical issues, and awareness of professional development that would benefit their students. I found this out first hand during my first year as a counselor when a student was reported of self-harm using a razor blade on their arm. Having a very limited knowledge on self-harm, I signed up for any professional development and conferences to better gain an understanding of why students self-harm. Specifically, what were the pros and cons of what to do in a counseling session and how to educate the principal and staff to recognize the red flags of a student who participated in self-harm. I did not have any clues on how to recognize, address, or help students who self-harm. After participating in professional development and attending a few conferences, I was able to bring back very needed information for their principal and staff to recognize the behavior of self-harm and how to address it. None of this would have occurred between the school counselor and principal, unless the I reached out noting that this was becoming an ever-increasing issue in our high school and impacting students at a higher rate than previously believed.

### **Principal Training And Relationship Building**

Principals did not have any professional training on the use of school counselors and what programs they needed to implement in their course work to become a school counselor. Most of the school principal's certification included legalities, curriculum development, and how to create policies and procedures that are beneficial to student learning. Principals also worried about laws and regulations on how to keep their students safe while in their buildings. However, many principals did

not realize that using their school counselors, can only help aid them in their quest for student safety and allowed the school counselor to implement their own curriculum that could parallel student learning and student safety. Principals had very limited knowledge on how to utilize their school counselors to help promote, advocate, and implement their vision and mission for their school.

There was no doubt, based on the findings of this study, that the partnership between the school counselor and their principal was extremely crucial in the success of both of their roles yet neither roles had any formal training on how to create such an environment. Participant nine was a middle school counselor in their third year and stated that having an open and honest relationship with the principal was paramount in how they approached their job. They spoke about working with their principal and how it was important to leave their own personal issues outside of the school. They continued to state:

We leave a lot of that baggage at the door when we walk into the school. So, I think I try to look at everybody through a trauma informed lens and that's even the person I am working with such as the principal. I think a lot of times people in roles may just be tunnel vision and it's like I have to do it this way and be quite controlling and that's not beneficial for anyone. So, it's having those open conversations and being willing to try different things. Working together is imperative...one person can't assume they know every answer or they are a one stop shop in the school....we (principals and school counselors) have to be like feeling open minded to see what works for a (all) kinds. So, we have conversations to make the best determination of what's good for kids.

The working partnership between the school counselor was a unique situation within the school. Both roles impacted the entire student body, so therefore their positive partnership only added to the success of the school and their students. Participants who completed the survey commented on this as a foundation for success. Some of the survey responses spoke about working collaboratively to contribute to the

successful path of all students. One commented that the principal must be seen as a strong leader who truly cared about their staff and students and make sure all our welcomed in their schools. Another response stated that their partnership between the two roles was exceptional. The principal was very much about listening to the staff, and recognizing the importance of teachers and staff including school counselors and valued everyone in their building.

Several of the response in their survey responses repeated the sentiment of the importance of working together and having a great relationship between the school counselor and principal. The responses spoke about the relationship having a lasting impact on the school and that working together and appreciating one another's strengths created an environment of cohesiveness that really worked for the benefit of both. One even stated that if you want to improve school culture and climate, it started with a strong and healthy partnership between the school counselor and their principal and knowing how to cultivate such a partnership. Principals and school counselors worked together on so many things, such as looking at testing data, scheduling for the upcoming year, discussing what worked and what did not work in the building, planning professional learning communities, bouncing ideas off each other to gain other perspectives and understanding that each role fostered student learning and school climate.

Upon reflection of my journal, it was noted that the school counselors also agreed that having an open and honest conversation with their principal was very important to the success or failure of each other's roles. I have worked with both principals who either valued or did not value the role of school counselor. I attested that

having a positive working and beneficial partnership impacted student learning and school culture. I have worked with principals who have valued the relationship between the school counselor and with principals who have not valued the role of their school counselor and it made a significant influence on whether or not I could be successful in my job or not.

Participant eight spoke specifically about this issue in their interview when they spoke about their own relationship with their principal. They stated:

The relationship between the school counselor and principal is really important. You are able to openly communicate with each other and not being afraid of like hurting each other's feelings you know. Because sometimes we have kind of a lens that were viewing things through and it's very hard for us to see from the other perspective. I think it's important for the relationship to be open to that and to bring up with your counterpart what needs to be discussed. I think teamwork for sure bringing your specialty to the table and just really having open communication is very important to the level of the relationship between the school counselor and principal.

### **Conclusion of Theme Three**

In conclusion of theme three, the findings could fall under the "I knew it all along" theory that of course having a positive relationship between the school counselor and principal could only improve school culture and student learning. Subsequently, not having a good partnership was a reason why there were many school counselors in Kentucky who did not share in this positive relationship. The theme of having an open relationship sometimes was not the norm in some schools and hopefully the findings of this research could propel many to work toward this positive relationship and help students, staff, and families meet with success and live to be their best selves.

The relationship between the school counselor and principal was vital to the betterment of their students. Over two thirds of the interviews and surveys highlighted

the importance of this relationship by stating it allowed for open communications, validation of each other's roles, and created a unified approach to working with their students, staff, and parents. Without the positive relationship which existed between the two, it led to a negative work relationship, created an atmosphere that was not conducive to student learning and a hostile work environment, and fostered mistrust between the two roles.

As stated earlier in the research, the unhealthy relationship between a school counselor and principal led to a "cancer" which permeated through the school, students, and staff. The lack of a positive relationship added to the role confusion of the school counselor and it permitted the principal to ignore and dismiss the school counselor and the programs in which they were trying to implement for their students. If school counselors were not allowed to implement their programs and services, then their number one client, being their students, was not being successful and students did not receive the needed services they could use to reach their full potential.

On reflection in my personal notes and journal, I remembered a time when I wanted to create a psychoeducational group on helping students who were struggling with tobacco addiction, specifically with smokeless tobacco. The principal did not want students to miss any academic classes to participate in this group. I was not able to find a time to perform the group and many students continued to use smokeless tobacco and students were not able to learn strategies and steps to quit their addiction to this substance. The conflict between the school counselor and principal prevented me from helping the school to reduce a discipline issue of students using smokeless tobacco. The principal failed to realize that allowing the school counselor to provide the psycho-



educational group on strategies to eliminate smokeless tobacco use could only benefit the student body and discipline data by eliminating write ups of students who participated in using smokeless tobacco.

#### **Summary of Chapter Four**

After extensive surveys including 20 respondents and interviews of 9 school counselors and principals, three main themes emerged from the analysis of the research, 1) the role of the school counselors and principals, 2) the physical location of the school counselor and principal's office, and 3) the relationship that exists between the school counselor and principal. The surveys were sent out via the University of Kentucky list serve and included both practicing school counselors and principals.

The interviews included personnel that were school counselors, principals, and/or both. They held many years of experience ranging from several years to being a member of a retired staff organization like the Kentucky Teacher's Retirement System. The interviewees had a diverse background in their occupations and provided a wealth of knowledge to the topic of this research. As stated previously in the chapter, they all met the criterion of participating in the research and they sat for an interview which lasted nearly an hour or more. Participants in both the surveys and interviews, had at least one-year experience in their prospective fields and held a Kentucky certification in their roles of either school counselor or principals. One of the participant held both a certificate in school counselor and principalship. Their perspective was very unique and added much to the conversation since they were able to wear both hats and provide a unique input on their roles of both a school counselor and principal.

The combinations of surveys and interviews allowed me to identify the themes previously mentioned and delve deeply into the analysis of the research. A majority of the surveys and interviews echoed similar themes throughout the research, although there were outliers that countered the majority of the opinions of participants. In one such comment, a participant in the interviews, while valuing the input from the counselor, had a “the buck stops here” approach. While they sought input from their counselors, they expressed that the principal had the ultimate role in making decisions for their school. In fact, they implied that principals had information not privy to the school counselor in which the counselor needed to trust the principal in making the best decision for the student or the school. Participant six explained this in a more detailed way when they added:

The school counselor has to trust the principal. Sometimes there maybe decisions that the principals have to make that the counselors may not understand, but the counselor has to trust that the principal is making the best decision based on the information they were given.

Along with bi-monthly meetings with the chair of this dissertation committee, I continued to use a reflective journal process to avoid potential bias along with the meeting with my chair to ensure fair and accurate analysis of the research data. The reflective journal process allowed me to reflect on my own experience as a practicing school counselor to ensure that my potential personal phenomenological world would not cloud the analysis or impact potential conclusions based on the interviews and surveys.

In the final analysis, the three themes proved to be essential in the creation of an effective partnership between the school counselor and principal. The three themes

being 1) the role of the school counselors and principals, 2) the physical location of the school counselor and principal's office, and 3) the relationship that exists between the school counselor and principal. In Chapter Five we discussed these three themes highlighted and further considerations in the field of this research as it pertained to the state of Kentucky. Further analysis of the research showed consistent data across the nation as it was reflected in Kentucky's state of affairs of the role of school counselors and principals. The research conducted pertained exclusively to Kentucky's school counselors and principals as stated in the nature of the research question and topic of the study.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Since the inclusion of school counseling in public schools at the turn of the nineteenth century under the title of vocational counseling, there has been ongoing debate on the appropriate role of school counselors in public education. In cooperation with school counselors, the national debate concentrated on how a school's principal incorporated the counselor's role within the confines of the school. With over 100 years of school counseling in public education, school principals have harbored multiple views on how to use their school counselors. Schools' principals have perceived their school counselors as assistant principals who handled discipline, special education issues, and student supervision. On the other hand, in some schools, principals have allowed school counselors to implement counseling programming to address student needs, as outlined by their professional ethics and governing boards, such as the American School Counselor Association, Kentucky School Counselor Association, and the Educational Professional Standards Board, the state licensure agency of educators' positions in Kentucky.

As a current school counselor in Kentucky and a researcher, I wanted explored this relationship and role descriptions in schools as they related to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. While literature suggested the confused role between principals and school counselors at the national level, I wanted to research these topics exclusively regarding school counselors in Kentucky. I explored this topic since I became a school counselor in Kentucky in the early 2000s. I have also taught as an adjunct faculty member in Eastern Kentucky University's Department of Therapeutic Programs, where I have taught numerous subjects to future counselors, including developmental

guidance, the American School Counselor Association National Model, adolescent counseling, grief counseling, practicums, and internships. I have served both as a university supervisor for practicums and internships and as a site supervisor at school for students in these classes. I have worked with pre-service school counselors for the past 15 years and have come to understand the complexity of their roles within the school as dictated by their principals. Over the course of my journey as a school counselor, and working with future counselors, I could see firsthand this role confusion when it came to school counselors and their principals.

In addition, I served on the Kentucky Association of School Counselors' Executive Board as high school vice president and president elect, presented at numerous state conferences on topics related to school counseling, and served on national committees on diversity and college admissions pertaining to the role of school counselors by serving on the National Education Association Diversity Committee and the Common Application Advisory Board. My personal stake in this topic was paramount when beginning my study and in-depth research on the importance of school counselors' partnerships with principals. As I worked with future school counselors, I explored this topic as it related to Kentucky, how school counselors and principals collaborated to improve schools' culture, and how this unique partnership impacted student learning and achievement.

Various methods were used to ascertain information for this study, including surveys and interviews with school counselors and principals. The study involved nine interviews with a variety of school counselors and principals and collected 20 survey results, which were sent via a University of Kentucky listserv to school counselors and

principals. The participants' unique experiences in Kentucky provided rich insight into this topic, as I pursued data about the partnership between school counselors and principals. Later in the discussion, the results of this study were compared to the national discussion of this topic. The study focused entirely on the phenomenological perspective of school counselors and principals in Kentucky. The results of this study added to the rich conversation on this topic as Kentucky's school counselors and principals continued to struggle with their partnerships and how they could build partnerships together to help all students succeed in their schools which in turn promoted a positive school culture.

The data collected showed the reality of this struggle, not just in Kentucky, but across the nation. In Chapter 2, numerous articles highlighted the similar discussions presented in this research and added to the conversation on the research topic. The qualities identified for a school counselor and principal to work together were very similar to those found in the literature review of this research study. The lived experiences of Kentucky school counselors and principals provided similar inferences to those in the national research, which was very useful for creating a mutually beneficial partnership between school counselors and principals.

The purpose of the basic qualitative interpretive study was to identify the qualities in both principals and school counselors that fostered student learning and school culture. Three overarching themes were identified through the interviews and surveys as instrumental for the development of a unique partnership between the two offices. The themes were relationship and partnership, the environment, and the role of both positions within the school. A more in-depth discussion of these themes was

highlighted in this chapter, and the major themes dissected based on the study's research. The evidence in the Kentucky study echoed the familiar overtones discovered in the national literature and studies. Moreover, the discussion included the limitations of this current study, future considerations, and implications of this research, along with its relevance for and impact on school counselors and principals in Kentucky.

### **Kentucky Trends vs. National Trends.**

During the basic qualitative research study methods of interviews and surveys, it became apparent that the results in Kentucky mirrored current trends across the nation. Interviews and surveys mentioned the resulting role confusion that has hindered the partnership between school counselors and principals. Across the nation, role confusion had been rampant regarding what principals expect from school counselors. Many counselors were saddled with non-guidance duties that pertained little to their roles as school counselors. The ASCA National Model (2012) defined a non-guidance duty as anything pertaining to discipline, scheduling, supervision, chairing special education committees, and numerous other duties. While this practice has happened nationwide, it was also practiced here in Kentucky. As a practicing school counselor, I have personally been exposed to these non-guidance duties by my principals. Participation in these non-guidance duties had taken away time and resources that the school counselor could have used to meet students' needs. The ASCA National Model (2012) recommended that 80% of a school counselor's time be spent on direct services, such as individual, classroom, or group counseling. In Kentucky in a latest report published by the Kentucky Legislature, it was reported that school counselors have spent less than

60% of their time providing services to students. The lack of understanding of a school counselor's role, not only in Kentucky, but also nationally, contributed to the role confusion of what exactly constituted the duties required for a school counselor to meet students' needs (Kentucky Legislative Research Committee, 2019).

According to ASCA (2012), the national average school counselor-to-student ratio is 900 to 1, and the ASCA recommended that the ratio between school counselors and students be 250 to 1. However, in Kentucky, it is currently 458 for every one school counselor. While the Kentucky State Legislature (2019) has endorsed the ASCA's recommended 250 to 1 ratio, it has done very little to allocate funds to hire more school counselors. Many districts have applied for grants to increase school counselors but other districts have been confined to current staffing allocations, which included very limited roles for school counselors or the addition of new ones.

The number of school counselors impacted the services provided to students. If a school counselor could not implement a program due to performing non-guidance duties, the students suffered. They suffered from not engaging in meaningful school counselor activities that could teach them skills for school success, such as coping skills, study and self-regulation skills, and many other useful tools and strategies that could help students be successful in the classroom. Principals recognized the importance of the role of their school counselors and how they augmented a school's academics. In the post Covid-19 era, principals understood that until students' mental health needs are met, learning has not occurred or will happen very slowly. School counselors have been especially equipped to help in this area as sometimes they are the most trained mental health employee within a school. Consequently, the more school



counselors a school has employed, the more services it can provide students to reduce barriers to student success (ASCA, 2012).

School counselors in Kentucky have faced many challenges which also impacted school counselors across the nation. Another challenge facing school counselors was there had been a lack of resources and training of school principals and how they could utilize their school counselor. The lack of resources and training of school principals added to the principals' lack of understanding of the role identification of their school counselor. According to the ASCA National Model (2012), the school counselor and principal must work together to provide the best educational setting for all students. While many school counselors and principals work well together, Kentucky has many schools where this did not occur.

In these schools, the school principal perceived the counselor as a de facto assistant principal who helped with discipline, supervision, testing, and teacher evaluation, which was totally out of the scope of practice for a certified school counselor. Sadly, a few districts in Kentucky did not even employ a certified school counselor in their schools, but instead outsourced the mental health needs of their students to outside agencies.

However, the situation may be changing in Kentucky and nationwide. Since the onset of COVID-19 and the return to a "normal" school day, many districts and administrations have recognized the importance of mental health. Studies conducted since COVID-19 and the return of students to schools, have highlighted the extreme mental health needs. In many studies, students expressed high feelings of anxiety, self-isolation, loneliness, suicide ideation, self-harm, despair, and numerous other feelings

that impacted their mental health needs. Indeed, schools have faced alarming mental health crises when dealing with students emerging from COVID–19 isolation.

According to the Center for Disease Control (2022), the data showed a cry for help, more than a third of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health and nearly half reported they persistently felt sad and hopeless.

Guessoum (2020) stated that:

Adolescents are a vulnerable group and they are experiencing a time of difficult transition. the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown may have multiple consequences on the lives of adolescents chronic and acute stress, worry for families, unexpected bereavements, sudden school breaks, home confinement and increased time of access to the internet and social media, worry for the economic future of their family and country. (p. 1)

Principals have recognized the importance of mental health in student learning in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, school systems have noted the significance of mental health and have allocated resources, funding, staffing, and professional development to train staff to deal with mental health issues in their classrooms. In many school districts, the school counselor and the school were the only staff and location for some students and families to receive mental health services. The Center for Disease Control was hopeful when it came to combating the youth mental health crises in schools. The CDC stated that “schools are a crucial partner in supporting the health and well-being of students. In addition to education, they provide opportunities for academic, social, mental and physical health services that can help protect against negative outcomes” (2022)

## **Implementation For School Counselors and Supervision**

Many counselor education and supervision programs had been staffed with numerous trained mental health clinicians and instructors. However, in many counselor education and supervision programs, employing an instructor who was once a school counselor had usually not been the norm. While many counselor education and supervision programs had hybrid programs, with both clinical mental health and school counselors as students, instructors have usually been more heavily versed in clinical mental health, with faculty members who may have limited to no knowledge of school counselors' work in schools.

In working with pre-service school counselors, one study demonstrated that faculty members did not feel comfortable and felt it was a challenge to teach pre-service school counselors based on mental health and CACREP standards. According to Brinser (2023) described this conflicting duality as follow:

Although the profession of school counseling has existed for over a century, there are still philosophical differences and competing professional identity models that have led to conflicts regarding how school counselors should be trained. In particular, school counselor educators working in multi-specialization counselor education programs often face the challenge of balancing school counseling among other specialties and feel that school counseling students are left with less content and training applicable to the school setting. As a result, there is a concern that counselor education programs do not always meet the unique needs of school counseling students. (p. 15)

One of the themes identified in this study was the roles that school counselors play within their schools. As mentioned in the previous pages, role confusion hindered the working partnerships between school counselors and principals. The beginning of the role confusion could be traced to the school counselor's training in their preservice counselor education and supervision program. In fact, both preparation programs for

each role of the school counselor and principal, spent very little time on how school counselors and principals must work together. Indeed, in my experience during my own graduate program, very little time was spent on this topic. In one of the interviews, Participant one (who served in both roles) commented that, in her training as a school counselor and principal, very little graduate class time was spent explaining each role, including how they should work together for students. The conversation mostly centered on the idea that the principal supervised the school counselor, who performed duties outlined by the principal, even if those duties were not counseling-related.

Correspondingly, it was not until I took COU 814, Comprehensive School Guidance, in my graduate program, that the role of school counselor, according to the ASCA National Model, was discussed. As per ASCA (2012), each school counselor should perform specific counseling duties for students. Unfortunately, many principals were not familiar with the ASCA's National Model, thus adding to the confusion about each other's roles and not understanding the impact school counselors could have on student learning and school culture.

According to Slaten et al. (2012) school counselors were often required to take course work that was unrelated to school counseling that had little to no bearing on their professional role. The authors continued to state that counselor educators were in a unique position to have influence on the potential work of future school counselors. School counselors sometimes felt as if they were "lumped" into the mental health classes in order to learn about techniques and strategies they would never use as a school counselor. The role of a school counselor was not to see students in a long-term clinical setting, diagnose students, or provide billing services to receive mental health

services but to provide triage services to get students stable and back to their classes in a learning environment.

School counselors should expect their graduate level training incorporate their own standards of what it meant to perform the job as school counselors (ASCA, 2012). While there were many overlapping courses for both school counselors and mental health counselors, as stated earlier, a practicing school counselor could not perform many duties ascribed to mental health counselors, such as diagnosing, billing, prescribing medication, and providing long-term counseling to clients. Mental health clinicians have complemented the school counselor's services by having a school counselor utilize outside agencies and referrals for further patient services. However, school counselors have been limited in the scope of the duties they can perform in their mental health settings. The school counselor has been considered a triage counselor to help eliminate barriers to students' learning and get them back in the classroom to achieve their learning objectives. School counselors can also refer students to outside agencies but cannot perform the duties found in mental health providers' offices, treatment facilities, hospitals, or prisons.

Graham et al., (2011) researched the professional role of a school counselor and principal and concluded the following four recommendations based on their study of school counselors' preparation for counselor educators:

1. It would be advantageous for counselor educators to create a team-teaching approach within their department and to create leadership teams to help them understand the role of school counselors.

2. Counselor educators should provide a holistic approach to future school counselors to help them understand their own leadership potential within the school. In addition, it provides consistency among counselor education programs to help eliminate the constant role confusion among school counselors, counselor educators, and principals.
3. Continued outreach should be provided to school counselors and districts to clarify the role of school counselors. Counselor educators are crucial to help educate principals, superintendents, and districts on what a school counselor's functions should be and to help facilitate practicum and internship school counselors on what the expectations are for their performance in school.
4. School administrators have varied views of the role of school counselors, and they continue to need training and professional development in the role of their school counselors. Training is paramount for eliminating role confusion within the school and can provide clarity and consistency regarding how the school counselor can support the principal's vision and the mission of the school (p. 104).

Another implication of the research and this study was the importance of professional development for both school counselors and principals. Too often, counselors had been required to attend professional development programs that do not pertain to their programs and services. School counselors often been required to attend professional development on instructional strategies, discipline, the latest educational research, or whatever their district deemed necessary for the professional development of the staff.

In my 20 years as a practicing school counselor, I have never attended a district professional development program primarily focused on counseling strategies and services. In addition, many school districts have experienced budget cuts and, therefore, could not send school counselors to state conferences or regional meetings. In fact, a recent study noted that the instructional leadership of the school and the district did not provide an adequately intentional professional development plan for school counselors as related to CACREP. Akos and Duquette (2022) stated the following:

“It is common for school counselors in the United States to feel a discrepancy between their expected role based on how they were trained and their actual role based on the knowledge and desires of school leaders. There is also an on-going conversation regarding whether school counselors should view themselves as primarily educators with counseling skills or counselors who happen to work in a school setting, with some tension in trying to balance education and mental health student needs” (p. 2).

It has been quite rare for a school district to provide school counseling and professional development services to school counselors. The research in this study showed the importance of school counselors and principals collaborating to achieve the maximum outcomes of the counselor and their programs and services. As the school counselor and principal work together in their beneficial partnership, a plan of professional development should be implemented to enhance the school counselor’s self-awareness as a school counselor, to recognize recent trends and data impacting school counseling, and to identify strategies and services that they should provide students in schools. The principal should allocate funds for school counselors’ attendance at state and regional conferences, influence district decisions on professional development as it relates to school counselors, and create an environment at their

schools that promotes the active learning and lifelong educational development of their school counselors. Akos and Duquette (2022) continued to state that:

“Most importantly school counselor educators need to balance comprehensive preparation with acceptance, understanding, and compassion for the varied and contextual demands on the practicing school counselor. No matter the preparation standards, school counselors will need continued professional development to ensure competency in serving the schools and communities where they work. Student, cultural, and community needs should dictate priorities, approaches, and collaboration” (p. 7).

As mentioned earlier in this study, principals often had a conflict with the role of school counselors. The conflict prevented the principal from understanding the importance of the school counselor attending to their own subject-oriented professional development and not understanding the ASCA National Model’s recommendation of the school counselor’s role:

“There is a gap in training, understanding and support of the ASCA National Model and state specific models of school counseling from both school administrators who have and do not have mandatory administrative training in place. School counselors need to understand their role as delineated by ASCA, the importance of the school counselor in system wide change, and the value of the national model as a foundation for a comprehensive school counseling program (Graham et al., 2011, p. 104).

Further considerations of my study highlighted the importance of school counselors attending their own professional development training instead of attending required district or school professional development that has no bearing on their role in the school. Principals should understand the importance of school counselors attending their own professional development. Understanding this element was crucial to understanding the role of a school counselor. Too often, principals were unaware of the role of a school counselor and lacked the knowledge to allow their school counselors to pursue their own professional development. Without this understanding, school counselors were forced to attend meaningless professional development sessions, with



very little bearing on the professional services and practices they should provide for their students.

Comprehensive school counseling plans and data.

Another implication of the research presented here was the implementation of a comprehensive school guidance plan. School counselors in Kentucky and nationwide have not subscribed to a specific curriculum that would allow them to meet the needs of their students. Too often, school counselors operated from a reactive approach to students instead of a proactive approach. When a school counselor operated from a reactive perspective, they were usually trying to solve the most immediate crises of the day. School counselors who operated from a proactive approach used varying skills and strategies to try to prevent crises. In essence, the reactive counselor was always reacting to crisis after crisis, while proactive counseling tried to implement services, curricula, and strategies to prevent crises from occurring.

The ASCA National Model has been considered the premier level of what counseling services and curriculum should be delivered to students. The model has operated from a proactive stance, aiming to eliminate the conditions of issues before they become crises. According to the ASCA National Model (2012), school counselors who follow their suggestions can reduce discipline, increase attendance and graduation rates, and enhance academic attainment. The ASCA National Model was a framework that allowed school counselors to build counseling programs focusing on academic, personal/social, and career goals. The goal of the model was for school counselors to provide services that eliminate barriers to student success.

## School Counselor Time

Since time was one of the counselor’s most valuable resources, ASCA has suggested an 80%-time frame for providing direct services to students, implementing a research-based guidance curriculum and reducing the amount of time that school counselors waste on non-guidance duties. The following tables illustrated that Kentucky was falling short of meeting the national benchmark of 80% of direct services to students and the number of school counselors per grade level in Kentucky schools.

**Table 5.1**

Number of Survey Responses of School Counselors Per Grade Level Not Meeting the Percentage of Direct Services Provided. Source (Kentucky Legislative Research Committee, 2019).

<b>Direct Service Job Duties For School Counselors</b>	<b>All Schools</b>	<b>Elementary School</b>	<b>Middle School</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Multiple School Levels</b>
Academic counseling	13.4%	3.5%	11.3%	25.2%	14.2%
Mental health counseling	18.2	19.4	21.6	15.3	16.5
Student personal/social development	10.2	14.8	6.9	7.5	7.1
Counseling students with attendance and discipline problems	9.3	8.8	9.9	9.5	10.1
Other counseling duties not mentioned	2.3	1.6	2.0	3.1	2.7
Total average percent of time spent on direct services	53.4%	48.1%	51.7%	60.6%	50.6%

**Table 5.2**

Percentage of School Counselors providing direct services to students. Source (Kentucky Legislative Research Committee, 2019).

<b>School Level</b>	<b>Number Of Counselors At School Level</b>	<b>Number Of Counselors Not Meeting 60% Goal</b>
Elementary	328	221
Middle	158	95
High	299	124
Serving multiple levels	39	27
Total	824	467

Several states have adopted the ASCA's National Model as their approach to guidance curriculum and the use of counselor time. At the moment, the Kentucky Department of Education does not endorse a statewide curriculum. Kentucky counselors were supposed to have implemented specific standards according to the Educational Professional Standards Board; however, there has been no accountability for what programs and services were offered at each school and district. Therefore, there has been another inconsistency in what is being implemented at each school, with no state-level curriculum and no accountability. For example, some schools offer classroom guidance, while others do not. Some schools provide group counseling, while others do not. If there was a statewide curriculum with accountability, these strategies would be required to be implemented with fidelity, and the school counselor held accountable if they did or did not implement them. If not implemented, the school counselor would be held accountable and should be reflected in their yearly summative evaluation.

The ASCA's National Model (2012) provided intentional curricula, strategies, and standards that allow school counselors to create proactive programs for their schools and students. It permitted the school counselor to audit what was being conducted in each grade. It allowed the school counselor to review the use of their time in the school day, and it set up a strategy for the school counselor and principal to create a management agreement for each other's perspective of each other's role in the school. The management agreement helps eliminate much of the confusion associated with the role of the school counselor because it outlines the specific roles and expectations of the school counselor throughout the year. The agreement would clarify any role confusion regarding the principal's expectations of a school counselor. The management agreement

should be completed at the beginning of the school year before students arrive on their first day.

Having a management agreement in Kentucky with the principal and school counselor would help outline their roles and would help the school counselor implement their programs and services for their students, as outlined in the ASCA National Model. The research in this study served as a foundation to begin a conversation in Kentucky about the adoption and implementation of the ASCA National Model across the Commonwealth. If Kentucky were to achieve such a lofty goal, then no matter if the student hailed from Pikeville or Paducah, they would receive a top-standard, evidence-based, and qualified guidance curriculum that would help all students in Kentucky remove barriers and potentially achieve success.

Another implication of the management agreement in this research regarded allocating the school counselor's time resources. It provided an outline and agreed-upon framework of what the school counselor and principal expected from their prospective roles. Once this management agreement was established, it would benefit the counselor to publicize their programs and services. The ASCA National Model encouraged all school counselors to publish their school calendars and list the services and programs they provide. While school counselors have usually not been accustomed to advocating for themselves, this was perceived as a pivotal element in the school counselor–principal relationship. As noted in several interviews, role confusion was often a part of the bigger picture that the school principal had no idea what the school counselor was doing. Publishing the school counselor's calendar clarified any ambiguity that the principal may had about the day-to-day job of a school counselor.

In addition, it was equally important for the school counselor to report their calendar data to their school principals and any other entities that would benefit from this data, such as site-based decision-making teams, school boards, faculty meetings, and parent organizations. Publicizing the school counselor’s calendar informed all stakeholders exactly what the school counselor and their programs were accomplishing. The better the school counselor can educate staff, principals, students, and parents, the more supported the school counselor felt to implement their services. In many cases, when staffing allocations were cut, school counselors’ jobs had often been on the chopping block because principals had not truly understood their roles. It would be more difficult to eliminate school counselors who have kept a calendar, published their services and programs and revealed their results to show that the position of school counselor was having an impact on student learning and school culture. I have included a chart of what I do in a typical week as a high school counselor.

**Table 5.3 Typical school counselor school day in a Kentucky High School**

Please see the following:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Prepare for week Register new student Work with seniors Crisis interventions	ACT Testing Group counseling Individual sessions Meet with administrators	Transcript reviews Meet with teachers Classroom guidance Individual sessions	Individual Sessions Parent meetings Work with failing students Refer to outside agency	Prepare for next week Publish calendar Individual sessions Self-care

I have witnessed the reduction of counseling staff firsthand. The school where I am a practicing school counselor had a middle school counselor’s position that the school

board wanted to eliminate for budgetary issues. The parents approached the school board and advocated for the school counselor and the many services and programs he provided to their children. If not for the parents who understood the importance of having a school counselor for their children, the position would have been eliminated, and the students would not have received counseling services. To the school counselor's credit, he kept parents informed of the programs and services he provided. The parents recognized the importance of having a school counselor and advocated for his role, thus saving his position at the middle school. Such advocacy for the school counselor's position would not have occurred if parents did not see the value of having a school counselor available to their students and if he had not informed parents of the services and programs he was able to provide their students.

### **Comparison of the Findings to Current Research**

The research of this study focused primarily on the lived experiences of school counselors and principals in Kentucky. The study reflected the national norms regarding school counselors and principals. Across the nation, principals were often confused about a school counselor's role. School counselors have been traditionally saddled with non-guidance duties dictated by the school principal and have not been permitted to perform their role as school counselors.

“Indeed, across the nation, research has demonstrated that school principals have not understood the role of a school counselor. According to national data, the confusion and lack of clarity regarding the role and function of counselors in schools has been highly visible and problematic in the educational field for years. There has been overwhelming evidence revealing the pervasive confusion which exists regarding any consistent role functions for professional school counselors and the appropriate and effective utilization of schools counselors appears to be unclear. In sum, it is initially incumbent upon proactive school leaders to

familiarize themselves with the forthcoming counselor's role statement as the initial step in the appropriate and efficient utilization of the school counselor for school effectiveness and productivity" (Leiberman, 2004, p.556 ).

The national research reflected Kentucky's situation and the conversations with the school counselors in this study. Many school counselors, both in the interviews and in the surveys, indicated that their principals lacked an understanding of what their roles should be in their building. Principals usually utilized school counselors as additional assistant administrators who could help with supervision, discipline, and evaluations. In fact, school counselors should not have been involved in any of these activities. Instead, they should have performed guidance duties to implement the goals and services of their guidance plans. According to Leiberman, the importance of clarity of the school counselors' roles between the school principal allowed for all parties to have a say in the success of students in their building because of the clarity of roles (2004).

Confusion has also accompanied a misunderstanding of the duties that a school counselor should perform. ASCA (2012) prescribed that school counselors spend up to 80 percent of their time in direct services. As in Kentucky and across the nation, school counselors have struggled to meet this benchmark because of their being asked to perform duties that should not be assigned to them. Scheduling students, chairing special education committees, supervising lunch duty, and dealing with discipline are not recommended for school counselors. In relationships with the school principal, counselors were perceived as assistant administrators. Therefore, they were not able to perform the duties they should have as a school counselor.

## **Conclusion of the Research**

The basic qualitative study focused primarily on the lived experiences of Kentucky school counselors and principals and how their relationships impacted student learning and school culture. The study consisted of nine interviews with both school counselors and principals and a survey distributed via the Kentucky Listserv, where school counselors and principals responded to the questions posed. The interviews and surveys comprised a wide variety of school counselors and principals, ranging from one year of experience to retired status. Several participants even wore both hats of being a school counselor and a school principal and their input was invaluable to this study.

When the interviews and surveys were completed, data analysis began. As the study focused on Kentucky, it was compared to the literature and findings at the national level. The findings in Kentucky corroborated what school counselors and principals have faced across the nation. For example, there was extreme role confusion about what duties school counselors should perform in their job capacities. Role confusion was very evident in the interviews and surveys in which school counselors reported that either they were perceived as a practicing school counselor or as simply another member of the administration with a limited definition of their roles. Moreover, there was an extreme lack of understanding by principals of the duties and responsibilities of their school counselors. Consequently, the interviews and surveys echoed national reports. School counselors have traditionally been saddled with non-guidance duties, such as scheduling, supervision, discipline, and testing. According to ASCA (2012), the student-to-school counselor ratio should be 250 to 1. In Kentucky and nationally, most school districts have



not met this ratio. The national average school counselor-to-student ratio was close to 900 to 1, well below ASCA's recommendations.

Another trend recognized in this study was the use of counselor's time and the need for school counselors to advocate for their positions within their schools. School counselors in this study commented, not only on the confusion of their roles and responsibilities, but also the use of their time. Naturally, time was among the most precious resources anyone could utilize vocationally; how one spends one's time determines what was deemed important and worth accomplishing. As advocated in the ASCA's National Model (2012), school counselors should sit with principals and create a management agreement to discern what both parties deem important to the school counselor's focus. When a management agreement was used correctly, similar to a contract in which the principal and counselor stipulate what they believe was best for the counselor's time and attention, then the school counselor could focus on the services and programs they offered students. Accordingly, the management agreement was intended to transform the school counselor program and services from a reactive approach to school counseling to a proactive approach. According to ASCA (2012), the paradigm shift allowed school counselors to focus on augmenting students' learning, improving attendance, decreasing discipline referrals, and ameliorating promotion and graduation rates.

The research clearly demonstrated that having a positive partnership with the school counselor and principal, assumption of clear role definition, and the adoption of an evidence-based guidance curriculum could only add to the positive working alliance between the two roles. It would take efforts on both sides of this issue to work together

and to understand how each other work together to help all students and schools succeed. A lot more discussion needed to occur on this topic to effectively improve this relationship between the school counselor and principal to ensure that all students, staff, parents, and stakeholders benefited from having a school counselor that could implement their guidance programs and services.

### **Future Consideration**

Future considerations and applications of the research impacted Kentucky school counselors and principals. The goal of this research was to start a conversation between the two roles to create a positive working partnership for the betterment of students and schools. The research was perceived as a catalyst for promoting the conversation to a level where school counselors and principals discussed what they perceived the role of school counselors was and how it could benefit students. The research in this study suggested that school counselors should be included in their own professional development instead of being forced to attend professional development programs that lack germane information about their jobs. Principals should offer and allow school counselors to find meaningful professional development that would enhance their role as school counselors and allow them to learn about new programs and services to help them continue their education and provide updated and current strategies on how they could best impact their students in their programs and services. School counselors and principals should also adopt an evidenced based curriculum that is student center which helps student to break down the social emotional barriers to become an active and effective student. Finally, this research highlighted the need for pre-service school

counselor programs in higher education to be tailored more to school counselors instead of a hybrid approach that included both school counselors and mental health degree seekers in counseling programs. As a side bar, the research also highlighted the need for school counselors to seek higher education degrees to enter master's and doctorate programs to train future school counselors such as what I am currently pursuing. As mentioned previously, many post-secondary counseling programs have more mental health professors than instructors who have practiced school counseling. School counselors must take charge of their own training and education and seek programs, including instructors, who have served the role of school counselors and who can empathize with students in their upcoming job positions and training.

This basic qualitative study captured the lived experiences of school counselors and principals in Kentucky, which mirrored many national trends. The participants in this study agreed that many issues related to the topic were the lack of communication between school counselors and principals and role confusion. Accordingly, the intent of this work was to start a conversation not only in Kentucky, but also outside the state to improve communication between the two roles. All participants in both the surveys and interviews agreed on one essential factor: The roles of school counselor and principal has been paramount to helping students; however, they were unclear on how to achieve this in the current state of affairs in public schools and with current lack of understanding on this topic by all levels in education. The study conducted should serve as a springboard for conversations between school counselors and principals on how they can create a positive working partnership to promote student learning and create a positive school culture.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Secondary School Counselor Management Agreement**

**Appendix A: Secondary School Counselor Management Agreement**

**Example: Secondary School Counselor Management Agreement**

School Year \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Counselor \_\_\_\_\_

**STUDENT ACCESS:**

Students will access the school counselor by:

- a. Grade level c. Domain e. By academy/pathway
- b. Alpha listing d. No caseload (see any counselor) f. (Other) please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR OF THE DAY**

Our counseling program will \_\_\_\_\_ will not implement counselor of the day.

**DOMAIN RESPONSIBILITIES**

Looking at your site needs/strengths, counselors will be identified as the domain counselors for the following areas:

Academic domain: \_\_\_\_\_ Career domain: \_\_\_\_\_ Personal/social domain: \_\_\_\_\_ Rationale for decision: \_\_\_\_\_

**PROGRAMMATIC DELIVERY**

The school counseling teams will spend approximately the following time in each component area to ensure the delivery of the school counseling program?

\_\_\_\_\_ % of time delivering guidance curriculum \_\_\_\_\_ % of time with individual student planning \_\_\_\_\_ % of time with responsive services \_\_\_\_\_ % of time with system support

**SCHOOL COUNSELOR AVAILABILITY**

The school counseling department will be open for student/parent/teacher access from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

The department will manage the division of hours by \_\_\_\_\_ The career center will be open from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ The department will manage the division of hours by \_\_\_\_\_

Programs and services presented and available to parents include:

*Example: counseling department newsletter, parenting classes, parent information night*

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**Example: Secondary School Counselor Management Agreement, cont.**

Programs and services presented and available to staff include:

*Example: department liaison, topical information workshops (child abuse, ADD, etc.)*

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Community liaisons, programs, and services will include:

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**THE SCHOOL COUNSELORS WILL BE COMPENSATED FOR EXTRA WORK HOURS (BEYOND WORK DAY) BY?**

Extra duty pay (fund\_\_\_\_\_ ) Comp time By principal/counselor negotiation Flex schedule Per union regulations No option for this

**MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES**

What materials and supplies are necessary for the implementation of the school counseling program?

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The following funding resources support the school counseling program:

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**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**



The school counseling team will participate in the following professional development:

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**PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION**

The school counseling department will meet weekly/monthly:

As a counseling department team With administration

With the school staff (faculty) With subject area departments With the advisory council

**OFFICE ORGANIZATION**

Responsibilities for the support services provided the counseling team will be divided among the support services staff :

The school counseling assistant will: \_\_\_\_\_

The clerk will: \_\_\_\_\_

Volunteers will: \_\_\_\_\_

How will this agreement be monitored during the school year?

\_\_\_\_\_ Counselor signature & date Principal signature & date

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The registrar will: \_\_\_\_\_ The receptionist will: \_\_\_\_\_

Others will: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Screening Questions**

## **Appendix B: Screening Questions**

Pre-interview questions:

1. How many years have you been a school counselor or principal?
2. To what extent are you familiar with the role of a school counselor or principal?
3. What is your understanding of student learning and school culture within your school?
4. Do you feel as if you are able to add information to the research question of how does the partnership between a school counselor and principal influence student learning and school culture?

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1.

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1. What are the qualities and characteristics of the working environment of the school counselor and principal that enhance student learning?
2. What qualities and characteristics do the school counselor and administrator have that allow for such a beneficial working environment?
3. How does the school counselor and principal work to cultivate their environment to enhance student learning?
4. What qualities and characteristics are an impediment to the development of a beneficial partnership between the school counselor and administrator?
5. How does having a poor partnership between the school counselor and administrator limit student learning in their school and negate a positive school culture?

## **Appendix D: Survey Questions**

## Appendix D: Survey Questions

1. What is your current role within your educational system?
2. Please select an answer to the following statement: “Is it important for school counselors and principals to work together to improve student learning and school culture?”
  - a. Strongly agree
  - b. Somewhat agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Somewhat disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
3. If you are a school counselor or administrator and answered strongly or somewhat agree, how would you describe the partnership with your principal/school counselor? Give specific details.
4. If you are a school counselor or administrator and answered strongly disagree or somewhat disagree, how would you describe the partnership with your principal/school counselor? Give specific details.
5. How would you describe your school culture?
6. What would you say either hinders or fosters school culture?
7. What would you like to add pertaining to the partnership between school counselors and principals?
8. What would you like to add on how schools can improve school culture and student learning as it pertains to school counselors and/or principals partnership?

## **Appendix E: Invitation to Participate**



## Appendix E: Invitation to Participate

My name is Eef Fontanez, and I am a doctoral candidate from the Department of Educational Leadership and Counselor Education at Eastern Kentucky University. You are receiving this letter to invite you to participate in a qualitative study involving the partnership between school counselors and principals. Your involvement would be in an interview and/or survey format.

Your participation is completely voluntary and your personal information would be kept confidential. If you decide to participate, you would be asked to sit for an hour-long interview and be asked questions about your knowledge of the partnership between school counselors and principals and how this partnership can impact student learning and school culture. Before you are selected to participate in the interview, you will receive a list of pre-interview questions.

Your answers on this document will determine if you are able to move forward in the interview. Due to Covid-19 issues, all safety measures will be adhered to and interviews will be conducted online via online video conferencing tools. The interview will be recorded, and the answers will be analyzed for the purpose of this research.

Your participation in this research will be completely voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential. You may withdraw from this research at any time for any reason at your discretion. If you feel like you would be interested in participating in this valuable research opportunity, please contact me via one of the methods listed below.

If you would like to participate in this project, please feel free to contact me through any of the methods below and please sign and return the invitation to participate. I appreciate your time and energy to reply to this research invitation.

Sincerely,

Eef Fontanez, MA Secondary School Counseling  
Doctoral Candidate. Dept. Educational Leadership and Counselor Education  
Eastern Kentucky University  
[Eef.fontanez@mymail.eku.edu](mailto:Eef.fontanez@mymail.eku.edu)  
[Eef\\_fontanez@mymail.eku.edu](mailto:Eef_fontanez@mymail.eku.edu)  
859-985-8045

Participant's

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix F: Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study**

## **Appendix F: Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study**

Professional Disclosure and Informed Consent Statement

Eef Fontanez, Certified School Counselor

Adjunct Instructor, ECU Department of Educational Leadership and Counselor  
Education

Doctoral Candidate, Eastern Kentucky University

*Qualifications:* I am currently in my 27th year in public education and 17th year as a high school counselor at Berea Community High School. I received my MA in Secondary School Counseling from Eastern Kentucky University in 2002, and I am currently pursuing my Ed.D. in the ECU Doctoral Concentration in Counselor Education and Supervision. I have taught as an adjunct instructor for ECU, including COU 814 Organizational Guidance, COU 825 Developmental Guidance, COU 880 Practicum in School Counseling, and COU 881 Internship in School Counseling. I have also served as an adjunct faculty member at Berea College, where I have taught EDS 225 Adolescent Development for Teachers and EDS 484 Clinical Experience in Teaching. I sat on the state executive board of the Kentucky School Counselor Association, where I served as the high school vice president, whose main goals were to promote the professional identity of school counselors and to organize the annual state KSCA conference in Lexington, KY. I also served this organization in the capacity of President-Elect. I have presented at numerous conferences and have written articles to promote the professional identity of school counselors across the Commonwealth. Currently, I sit on the state advisory council for school counselors and the national advisory council for the Common Application College Admission organization. Finally, I am very familiar with the ASCA National Model and work toward implementing its structure in my own counseling plan at Berea Community High School.

*Limits of Confidentiality:* I can assure you that I will take all possible measures to protect your confidentiality during this research. Your name will not be included on your interview transcript, but instead the interview will be identified by an assigned number. When presenting the findings of my research, I will use pseudonyms for all participants. My records for this research will be kept for 5 years, after which they will be destroyed.

*My Role as Researcher:* Dr. Carol Sommer will be the chair of my dissertation committee, with Dr. Ken Engebretson and Dr. Lawrence Crouch as committee members. I will conduct research within the ECU, KCA, KSCA, and CACREP ethical guidelines. If you have questions or concerns about my interactions with you or about my research, you may contact my dissertation committee chair at [carol.sommer@eku.edu](mailto:carol.sommer@eku.edu)