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HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS AND THEIR
PERCEIVED IMPACT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND OUTCOMES

By
Genevieve Octavia Lyons

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University College of Education
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Approval Page

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Abstract

HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS AND THEIR PERCEIVED IMPACT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND OUTCOMES. Lyons, Genevieve Octavia, 2022: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

This study illuminated the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors in low-performing schools. The study specifically explored the impact of the role of high school counselors on student engagement and outcomes (i.e., chronic absenteeism, dropout rate, and graduation and completion). A literature review revealed a need for research to probe the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors to determine how they regard their roles and discern if their assigned responsibilities impact school performance.

Quantitative results revealed that the high school counselors in low-performing schools in Virginia prioritize student academic performance by advocating and developing strategies to change policies and practices, improving access to academic support services, evaluating the school counseling program to increase academic performance, and monitoring student academic performance. Furthermore, they regularly consult with parents and administrators in addition to collaborating with teachers to identify underperforming students. Nearly 97% of the participating high school counselors prioritize social/emotional counseling. Qualitative results revealed five recurring themes: life-ready, connectedness, data-driven decision-making, strengthening understanding, and access and availability.

Keywords: high school counselors, student engagement, low-performing schools, school performance, ecological school counseling

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Chapter 1: Introduction

School counselors serve a vital role as their unique position can influence systemic change to address disparities in schools (Hines et al., 2017). The school counseling role embodies systemic change, advocacy, leadership, collaboration, counseling, assessment, and data-driven decision-making (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014; Martin, 2015). School counselors fulfill their roles by providing direct and indirect services to students. Indirect services require school counselors to collaborate with teachers, administrators, parents, and community stakeholders who can provide resources to students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a). ASCA (2021) defines school counselors as licensed educators certified to address the academic, career, and social/emotional development needs of students through the design, implementation, evaluation, and enhancement of a comprehensive school counseling program. ASCA (2013) describes the high school counselor role as follows:

Secondary school counselors are professional educators with a mental health perspective who understand and respond to challenges presented by today's diverse student population. Secondary school counselors do not work in isolation; rather they are integral to the total educational program. They provide proactive leadership that engages all stakeholders in the delivery of programs and services to help the student achieve success in school. Professional school counselors align and work with the school's mission to support the academic achievement of all students as they prepare for the ever-changing world of the 21st century. (para. 2)

ASCA promotes high school counselors as participants of an educational team who support structural change as leaders, consultants, coordinators, and facilitators providing

their schools with services through a comprehensive school counseling program (Tang & Erford, 2004). The urgency for organizational change was the basis for this study.

The school counseling profession is evolving to emphasize understanding students in context (McMahon et al., 2014). The Education Trust (2009) describes school counseling as a profession that emphasizes the relationship between students and their school environment to diminish influential ecological barriers that impede educational achievement. Instead of answering the question, "what do high school counselors do?" this study addressed the question, "how are students different because of what high school counselors do?" (ASCA, 2013). In addition, this study reveals the experiences of high school counselors and their perceptions regarding their work with high school students as a contribution to school counseling literature. Chapter 1 provides a statement and significance of the problem detailing issues proven to be detrimental to school counselor effectiveness and the dire consequences of not implementing a data-driven, results-based school counseling program. The purpose of the study is outlined as a concise narrative with research and literature that supports the purpose and significance of the study. A theoretical perspective is followed by research questions that guide the study, in addition to a list of defined terms considered relevant to the study.

Statement of the Problem

The school counselor's role is changing due to the increased emphasis on social-emotional learning, preventive services, and classroom-based counseling (Cook et al., 2018). School shootings, natural disasters, poverty, homelessness, and foster care children enrollment further expound the need for high school counselors. Research has established the vital importance of cultivating environments that encourage successful

development and the prevention of behavioral and psychological difficulties (Biglan et al., 2012; Biglan et al., 2020; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). Cultivating environments impact children and adolescents by curtailing their exposure to adverse experiences while reinforcing socially acceptable behaviors, discouraging problematic behaviors, and nurturing social-emotional health (Biglan et al., 2012). High school counselors promote school safety by helping students identify and address their problems as part of healthy development. In addition, high school counselors can play a crucial role in achieving the dual goals of school improvement and school safety by helping students develop the necessary skills to overcome barriers to learning and self-control. Traditional school counseling programs follow a service-driven model mainly focused on counseling, consultation, and coordination of services for students in need. However, effective school counseling programs must transcend from a service-driven model to a data-driven and standards-based model that incorporates leadership, advocacy, collaboration, technology, resources, and the use of data in addition to the traditional practices of counseling, consultation, and coordination of services (Stone & Dahir, 2006).

Effective school counseling programs operated by knowledgeable school counselors can provide convenient access to mental health services not otherwise accessible to students outside of school. Mental Health America (MHA, 2017) reported that “64.1% of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment” (para. 2). In other words, six of 10 children struggling with depression, suicidal thoughts, school issues, and challenging interpersonal relationships do not receive effective treatment (MHA, 2017). Major depression is recognizable in children who have substantial and persistent “feelings of sadness associated with suicidal thoughts and

impairs their ability to concentrate or engage in daily activities” (MHA, 2017, para. 3). Sadly, “7.4% of youth (or 1.8 million youth) experienced severe depression” (MHA, 2017, para. 3). “These youth experienced very serious interference in school, home, and in relationships, while 5.13% of youth in America reported having a substance use or alcohol problem” (MHA, 2017, para. 3).

Failure to provide mental health services and academic support can result in profound consequences for students, schools, and the community. “Many problems individual students bring to school counselors are symptomatic of larger issues, in which school counselors traditionally have not seen themselves as players in systemic change” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 44). Consequently, the ASCA National Model was designed to impact “the attitudes, skills, and behaviors of school counselors by outlining the focus of school counseling programs on improving student achievement” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 45). “School counselors that align their school counseling program with the school mission ensure that the school counseling program is connected to student achievement, social justice, advocacy, and accountability for the purpose of positively impacting the system” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 44). “Connecting school counseling to student achievement is not intended to diminish the attention school counselors give to the mental health needs of students” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 45). The connection, however, guarantees more meaningful opportunities to balance working with students individually and in groups to provide academic and career development and social-emotional development. This advancement in strategy promotes social justice to minimize the diversity gap of underserved and/or underrepresented students, including students with disabilities and mental health concerns.

An appraisal of school counseling literature revealed a deficit of research on how high school counselors experienced their roles and responsibilities in low-performing schools. In addition, research regarding high school counselors' perception of how their roles and responsibilities impact student engagement and school performance was lacking. This study establishes how high school counselors experience their roles and responsibilities within low-performing public schools to provide stakeholders with significant assumptions when assigning counselor duties and identifies responsibilities that increase the efficacy of services provided to all students. Results may also provide school principals and stakeholders with a better understanding of high school counselors' experiences with performing non-counseling duties within their school counseling role.

Significance of the Problem

In 2003, ASCA developed its National Model to provide professional school counselors with a framework to integrate into their school-based comprehensive school counseling programs; however, the development of this framework was not specific to school counselors as it also serves to educate stakeholders (school administrators and personnel, parents/guardians, community supporters, etc.) about the appropriate roles and duties of professional school counselors. School counselors are frequently inundated with administrative tasks (Cook et al., 2018) such as scheduling, hall monitoring, test coordination, registrar duties, providing classroom coverage, and data entry that prevents them from providing direct services to students. Consequently, "counselors suffer from role ambiguity and role conflict due to lack of a clear job description, overlap with similar professions, supervision by non-counseling administrators, inadequate forms of performance evaluation, and conflict between their roles as counselors and educators"

(Blake, 2020, p. 316). Role ambiguity hinders the progression and execution of quality comprehensive school counseling programs while diminishing the sincere importance of school counselors. “High school counseling programs are essential for students to achieve optimal personal growth, acquire positive social skills and values, set informed career goals and realize their full academic potential to become productive, contributing members of the world community” (ASCA, 2013, para. 13). ASCA (2019b) recommends a 1:250 counselor-student ratio to ensure the effectiveness of school counseling programs and suggests that school counselors spend at least 80% of their time providing direct student services (ASCA, 2013). However, ASCA (2019c) reported that the average counselor-student ratio in Virginia public K-12 schools was 1:345 for the 2018-2019 school year. States with the highest counselor-student ratios were Arizona (1:905), Michigan (1:691), Minnesota (1:654), Illinois (1:626), and California (1:612). On average, there is one counselor for every 430 K-12 public school students in the U.S. (ASCA, 2019c). Large caseloads make it a challenge to devote essential time to students (Smith, 2011). Evidence supports the notion that school counselor performance is negatively affected by high student ratios (McCarthy et al., 2010). Further, overwhelming caseloads were identified as one of the most difficult aspects of a school counselor’s position which leads to frustration because of the counselors’ inability to address the needs of all students (McCarthy et al., 2010). On the contrary, a study based in Missouri found that high-poverty schools with ASCA-recommended 1:250 student-to-school-counselor ratios were more successful overall academically and in outcomes (Lapan et al., 2012). The

high-poverty schools that met the ASCA criterion of having one school counselor

for every 250 students had better graduation rates (91% versus 86%, $t=3.91$, $p<.001$), higher attendance (94% versus 92%, $t=2.71$, $p<.007$), and fewer disciplinary incidents (2.17 versus 4.03, $t=-3.35$, $p<.001$). (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 115)

Role conflict is often due to inappropriate job duties (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017). Administrative-assigned non-counseling duties produce vagueness regarding the professional school counselors' role, diminishing the overall significance of the school counseling position (Moyer, 2011). A school counselor survey revealed that 74% of school counselors spent 5 or more hours per week on inappropriate job duties, and more than 50% of those school counselors spent more than 10 hours per week on inappropriate job duties (Moyer, 2011). Many of the surveyed school counselors believed they were required to perform inappropriate job duties assigned to them to protect their position within the school (Moyer, 2011). Moyer's study concluded that school counselors were less likely to be empathetic toward students when inundated with inappropriate non-counseling activities. Misguided perceptions of the school counseling role often result in school counselors' daily engagement in inappropriate roles (e.g., administrative tasks, clerical duties, state testing proctoring and/or coordination, scheduling, etc.).

“Greater accountability is needed for the professional school counseling role in student achievement since there are greater accountability measures being placed on schools” (Erford, 2019, p. 8). The school counseling profession has to make a shift from the traditional model of guidance counseling to a model that focuses on college and career readiness and removing systemic barriers to success for all students (Martin, 2015). By dispelling the traditional model, “school counselors promote change through

leadership, advocacy and systemic change, teaming and collaboration, counseling and coordination, assessment, and the use of data” (Martin, 2015, p. 50; Chen-Hayes et al., 2014). The high school counselors in this study will impact systemic change by sharing their experiences and perceptions with the education community. The results of the study may provide high school counselors with purposeful data to ignite conversation regarding the need for change within their schools, thus alleviating nonessential responsibilities that are often allotted to high school counselors.

Purpose of the Study

This mixed methods study aimed to illuminate the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors in low-performing schools. Further, this study explored the role of high school counselors and their impact on student engagement and outcomes (i.e., chronic absenteeism, dropout rate, and graduation and completion). An extensive review of the literature revealed a number of studies involving school counselors; however, there is no research specifically about the perceptions of high school counselors of working in low-performing high schools and the impact their roles and responsibilities have on student engagement. Based on the call for education reform (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015) and ASCA’s (2019a) description of the essential role of a high school counselor, empirical research is necessary to probe the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors to determine how they regard their responsibilities and to discern if their roles and responsibilities have an impact on academic performance. The findings of this research may be beneficial to school counselors, counselor educators, counselor supervisors, school counseling directors, school administrators, school board members, superintendents, and other key stakeholders in education.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to current research because most consideration has been attributed to teachers and principals in high-performing schools; nonetheless, there has not been much focus on the vital role school counselor's play in improving student outcomes (Hines et al., 2017). It has been over 16 years since the ASCA National Model was developed for the school counseling profession. However, hindrances continue to inhibit implementation of school counseling programs (Astramovich et al., 2013; Gysbers & Stanley, 2014). High school counselors should "define and focus the comprehensive school counseling program based on a school's academic, attendance, and behavioral data" (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2); however, school counseling literature highlights the pervasiveness of non-counseling responsibilities to illustrate the impact they have on the perception and practice of school counselors (Chandler et al., 2018). Bridgeland and Bruce (2011) prompted reform to encourage school counselor leadership, reduce administrative duties and caseloads, and increase accountability (Mau et al., 2016). The call for reform was in response to an obsolete interpretation of school counselor responsibilities on behalf of principals and district-level leaders, school counselors' lack of understanding and commitment to standards, and insufficient personnel to manage administrative duties in varying combinations. (Mau et al., 2016)

At the time of review, there was an absence of research regarding the perceptions of high school counselors working specifically in low-performing schools. Furthermore, given the previous research detailing the limitations and obstacles known to interfere with program implementation, this study is significant for the field because it specifically examined high school counselor perceptions and experiences regarding the impact of

their roles and responsibilities on school performance in the areas of absenteeism, dropouts, and graduation.

This study seeks to contribute a grounded theory methodology to school counseling literature that will report beneficial findings for policymakers, stakeholders, administrators, and counselors. Counselors may include research findings in their discussions with principals regarding school counseling services and to clarify role expectations and duties in order to meet student needs. School counseling directors and coordinators can use the findings to initiate discussions with superintendents and school board members about the perceptions of high school counselors regarding their roles. Last but not least, recent school counselor graduates may consider the findings to have a better understanding of their professional role as they seek employment.

Research Questions

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors based on the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of high school counselors who work in low-performing schools?
2. How do high school counselors perceive the impact of their roles and responsibilities on student engagement and outcomes, i.e., absenteeism, dropouts, and graduation and completion?

Experiences refer to the priorities, perceptions, and program management practices of the school counselors in their high school setting.

Definition of Terms

Various common and uncommon terms are used throughout the study; however, some terms may be used in a context that is unfamiliar to some readers. Due to the significance of these terms, readers must have a clear understanding of their meaning as they relate to the purpose of the study. Accordingly, the following terms are defined for clarification.

ASCA National Model

An organizational tool established by ASCA that serves as the foundation for a comprehensive school counseling program. The National Model is a framework that provides districts, schools, and school counselors with a guide for developing, implementing, and evaluating an effective school counseling program.

Comprehensive School Counseling Program

A school-based program based on national standards facilitated by professional school counselors. School counselors use student data to develop, implement, and evaluate the program domains in academic, career, and social-emotional development.

High School Counselor

Educational professionals with a master's degree and state-required certification in school counseling who provide equitable and appropriate services to students in Grades 9-12 to prepare them for postsecondary options (ASCA, 2019a).

Counseling Duties

Duties outlined by the ASCA National Model for the effective delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program. Appropriate duties include individual student academic program planning; providing individual and small group counseling services to

students; assisting principals with student issues; and collaborating with teachers to promote student success (ASCA, 2019b).

Non-Counseling Duties

Insignificant tasks in regard to the comprehensive school counseling program deemed inappropriate by ASCA. “Inappropriate school counseling activities, meaning any activity or duty not related to the development, implementation, or evaluation of the counseling program” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 15). Non-counseling duties may include long-term mental health therapy, test coordinating, processing new student enrollment, development of the master schedule, lunch/hall/bus duty, maintaining clerical records, serving as a data entry clerk, assisting with office duties, and supervising classrooms for absent teachers. Such duties do not align with curriculum objectives, standards, or goals and take away valuable time that could be devoted to providing services to students.

Fair-Share Duties

Duties and assignments in which all school faculty and staff are expected to perform to ensure appropriate functioning of the school. Fair-share duties typically fall under the “other duties as assigned” category and are often shared *equally* among faculty and staff.

Direct Student Services

Personal interactions between school counselors and students to include individual counseling, post-secondary planning, social-emotional instruction, and responsive services.

Indirect Student Services

Interactions between school counselors and others on a student’s behalf.

Interactions include collaborating with teachers and other educational staff; making referrals to student support services; and consulting with parents, administrators, and community organizations.

Standards of Accreditation

Standards that provide a comprehensive view of school quality.

School Quality Indicators

Areas of measured performance in academic achievement, achievement gaps, and student engagement.

Student Engagement

“A student’s active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities and commitment to educational goals and learning” (Lovelace et al., 2017, p. 71). Student engagement is beneficial for understanding and preventing dropouts.

Low-Performing Schools

“Schools that are in the bottom 10% of performance in the state or have significant achievement gaps based on student academic performance in reading/language arts and mathematics assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, para. 5).

Role Confusion

The self-proclaimed uncertainty of professional responsibilities and the degree of authority in the school setting. This occurs when various demands and expectations from a variety of people (administrators, teachers, students, and parents) conflict with the counselors’ professional roles in the school setting.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the theoretical framework of American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proclaimed that "human development occurs through processes of progressively complex reciprocal interactions between active, evolving human beings" (p. 6). "Ecological models include a body of theory and research concerned with the processes and conditions that govern the lifelong course of human development in the actual environments in which people live" (Bronfenbrenner 1994, p. 37). Moreover, ASCA's (2019b) "guidelines encourage school counselors to address systemic issues that impede the academic, career, and social/emotional development of students by creating respectful, inclusive environments conducive to learning" (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012, pp. 4-5); thus, school counselors with an ecological awareness can promote student growth and achievement by strengthening the connection between students and the school environment (Conyne & Cook, 2004; McMahon et al., 2014). This study further explored the effects of environmental influence on student engagement to demonstrate the essence of ecological systems theory.

The evolving school counseling profession is moving toward an ecological methodology (McMahon et al., 2014). Ecological methodologies have been used in various human service and social science fields, including school psychology (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000), social work (Unger, 2002), and psychotherapy (Conyne----- & Cook, 2004); but, "it has not yet been used intentionally and systematically to inform the scope of work expected of professional school counselors" (McMahon et al., 2014, p. 460). First, it is important to understand the core concept of ecology, in which ecosystems

include all aspects of an environment and everything within an environment is interconnected. Since “everything is connected, a change in any aspect of an ecosystem will create a ripple effect in all other aspects of the ecosystem” (McMahon et al., 2014, p. 462). In turn, “those effects will affect everything, including the original change agent” (McMahon et al., 2014, p. 462). Based on this theory that all systems are interconnected, high school counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs can have a rippling effect on student engagement and outcomes.

As stated by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994), ecological environments are catalysts for human development in which interactions exist within a set of five ecological systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). The five systems explain how environmental factors affect the behavior of individuals, particularly children (Hines et al., 2017). The systems were explored by Hines et al. (2017) to discuss how school counselors positively shape both the school environment and academic achievement through their work with students. Hines et al. connected the essential skills and duties of school counselors (counseling, consultation, coordination of services, leadership, advocacy, teaming and collaboration, use of data, and use of technology) to at least one ecological system in relation to the school setting. First, “school counselors are charged with working with students and other educational and non-educational stakeholders to ensure that students are academically successful, socially and personally competent, and college and career ready” (Erford, 2019, p. 216; ASCA, 2019b). Per the ecological systems model, this level of work takes place at the microsystem where school counselors are responsible for providing direct services to students, sometimes with the use of technology. At the mesosystem level, school counselors work on behalf of their

students when interacting (consultation; teaming and collaboration) with parents and teachers. Moreover, advocating for student resources at the school, district, and state levels (leadership) is an example of school counselors working within the exosystem level. School counselors understand and work within the cultural context of students (use of data), which places them in a unique position at the macrosystem level. Finally, in the chronosystem, school counselors are able to assist students with life events through the coordination of services outside of school.

Existing “research has shown that environmental factors can influence the academic performance and development of students” (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013, p. 219; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Stewart, 2007); thus, ecological theory offers a creditable perspective regarding the work of school counselors and how they positively affect school climate, student engagement, and outcomes. The ecological theory was examined in connection with this study to clarify the role of high school counselors. Using an ecological lens to assess the roles and responsibilities of high school counselors is a constructive step in “the ongoing transformation of school counseling and education” (McMahon et al., 2014, p. 462). Implementation of the theory assisted me in identifying and understanding the “rich and complex patterns of interaction that occur within schools” (McMahon et al., 2014, p. 462) and how those interactions affect student engagement. Furthermore, by gaining a more informative view of the experiences of high school counselors, I was better equipped to develop an essential interpretation of the factors that affect student engagement.

Summary

“Given the national dialogue about education reform, little is known about the

role of school counselors and the contributions they make to improve student outcomes” (Hines et al., 2017, p. 3). Although school leadership and staff can help shape the roles of school counselors, there is minimal support of school counselors and the affect their skills have on student academic success. School counselors are capable of collecting and analyzing data to identify systemic issues that negatively affect student performance. Within their role, school counselors can use data to create a collaborative team of teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders to address and eliminate systemic inequalities (ASCA, 2019b; Erford, 2019). Furthermore, “school counselors should be viewed as agents of organizational development as they can identify problems around student achievement and personal social development and implement interventions that can improve student success as well as academic outcomes” (Hines et al., 2017, p. 8; ASCA, 2019b). “As agents for inclusion, school counselors can advance student outcomes by obtaining knowledge of ecological systems and their impact on student academic achievement” (Brown, 2016, p. 34). It is crucial that school counselors and educational stakeholders are involved in improving student engagement and outcomes, especially in low-performing schools. This study highlights the critical duties school counselors perform and the effects those duties have on student outcomes and school achievement.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 establishes the foundation for understanding the roles and responsibilities of high school counselors in educational programs. “High school counselors are educators uniquely trained in child and adolescent development, learning strategies, self-management, and social skills who understand and promote success for today’s diverse students” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2). Furthermore, they enrich the learning process by promoting academic, career, and social-emotional development (ASCA, 2019b). High school counselors do not work in isolation; rather they are integral to the total educational program. “Their work aligns with the school’s mission to support the academic achievement of all students as they prepare for the ever-changing world of the 21st century” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2). High school counselors provide direct services through instruction, appraisal and advisement, and counseling in addition to indirect services of consultation, collaboration, and referrals. With high school being the final transition into adulthood, high school counselors assist adolescent students with making post-graduation decisions, coping with stressors, and managing increased pressures related to risk behaviors such as sex, drugs, alcohol, and unhealthy relationships; however,

school counselors often suffer from role ambiguity and role conflict due to a lack of a clear job description, overlap with similar professions, supervision by non-counseling administrators, inadequate forms of performance evaluation, and conflict between their roles as counselors and educators. (Blake, 2020, p. 6)

Moreover, there are “gaps in the literature pertaining to the roles of high school counselors” (Blake, 2020, p. 9), particularly their impact on school performance. Specifically, there is a lack of literature regarding high school counselor perceptions of

working in low-performing schools. This chapter summarizes the following areas of literature to support the purpose of the study: national education reform, low-performing schools, a historical overview of the school counseling profession, non-counseling duties, role conflict, confusion and ambiguity, and a theoretical perspective.

National Education Reform

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed ESSA which reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “the nation’s national education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a, para. 1). ESSA represents a clear goal for ensuring that all students attain college and career success (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grant was established to improve student achievement by providing funds to states and local school districts to implement innovative strategies and practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Priority goals of Race to the Top included closing the achievement gap among demographic subgroups by improving low-performing schools, improving academic performance, preparing students for college and careers, and increasing graduation percentages (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Similarly, the Title I School Improvement Grant disseminated \$3.5 billion for states to distribute to school districts in need of improving low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Each initiative is a derivative of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 to enforce accountability, increased regulation by state, parent choice, and implementation of research-based practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In response to COVID-19, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 was instated to provide schools with

approximately \$130 billion to aid and support recovery learning. Funds were disbursed to address learning loss, especially among traditionally underserved populations by providing technology, afterschool programs, summer school programs, mental health services, school building repairs, and health protocols to decrease COVID transmission (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

On the contrary, there is the implication that education reform has failed the United States public education system in which standardized testing, gentrification, school choice, and household economic downturn are identified as major influences of the widening achievement gap (Ravitch, 2020; Seelig, 2020). Seelig (2020) clarifies that unsustainable educational reforms have been instituted in the United States with a disregard for true economic realities since the early 1990's. Seelig (2020) further states that public education has begun to reveal an educational divide similar to the nation's economic divide. This implication is based on the Program for International Assessment (PISA) results that were released in December 2019, in which the United States' ranking listed below global competitors. The stagnant results imply that education reform in the United States over the past 20 years has essentially been ineffective (Seelig, 2020). Nonetheless, the top quarter of U.S. students has continuously improved performance since 2012, while the bottom quarter continues to decline. Consequently, the achievement gap appears to be spreading as opportunities are made available for "top" students at the expense of opportunities for students truly in need (Seelig, 2020).

Despite arguments over the effectiveness of education reform, the most important question remains: How do we improve schools in our nation? Individual states and school districts are under tremendous pressure to increase student performance (Johnson et al.,

2014). Scrutiny from state legislatures, the media, businesses, and special interest groups have made student achievement and school improvement a nationwide priority (Johnson et al., 2014). Most importantly, children nationwide need stability, qualified educators, and appropriately funded schools (Ravitch, 2020). In addition, children need schools supplied with nurses, librarians, and school counselors (Ravitch, 2020). Those in favor, as well as those opposed to education reform mutually agree that change is needed. More specifically, school improvement is needed. The unyielding need to improve low-performing schools is the driving force for this study as it signifies the value and importance of school counselors in the school improvement process.

Low-Performing Schools

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 enforced annual testing of students in grades three through eight, imposing sanctions on schools that do not succeed in adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP is a measurement of progress toward 100% of students meeting state academic standards in English/Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). AYP defines the minimum proficiency level that schools and school districts must achieve on annual tests and related academic indicators each year. Schools that fail to meet AYP are often referred to as low-performing (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In some states, schools with less than 60% of graduates for three years are deemed low-performing (Pascual, 2013). Some states categorize low-performing schools by obstinately mediocre standardized test scores, low graduation rates, and high dropout rates. (Seder, 2000). In addition, low-performing schools are typically overpopulated and have high rates of disciplinary infractions.

Low performance explanations differ among schools; however, low-performing schools often share similar conditions, such as poverty and organizational stress (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). Low-income communities often include low-performing schools where student and family resources are limited (Pascual, 2013). The stigma surrounding low-performing schools can cause organizational stress within the school (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). Organizational stress contributes to low expectations for student success, in addition to, increased teacher absenteeism and low teacher retention rates (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). Although poverty and organizational stress do not predict low performance, empirical research has identified a correlation between the two factors (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). Moreover, some schools succeed despite adverse conditions. Successful schools have more organized instructional programs that focus on student achievement and have a collaborative culture among all faculty and staff (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). In a more recent study, Williams et al. (2018) sought to gain a deeper understanding of high-achieving students with a low-income status to identify ways in which schools can encourage academic achievement. Participants stated that schools should create a culture of hope, develop social networks, and create meaningful partnerships with parents (Williams et al., 2018) as critical needs for improving school-wide academic performance.

Rutledge et al. (2015) conducted a year-long multilevel case study to ascertain differences among high-performing and low-performing high schools. Rutledge et al. (2015) discovered that effective high schools equipped students with academic and social-emotional systems to ensure success. In the effective schools, stakeholders worked together to unify academic and social-emotional elements (Rutledge et al., 2015). In the

higher-performing schools, a deliberate effort was made among all staff to connect with students and get to know their backgrounds (Rutledge et al., 2015). Regarding improving school performance, the recurring message is the significance of relationships and collaboration among all stakeholders, including students. Accordingly, this study explored high school counselor perceptions regarding their impact on school performance by building relationships with students and collaborating with stakeholders to improve student outcomes.

As a result of the troubling statistics surrounding student achievement, legislators and researchers are urged to identify successful resolutions for all students (Schmid, 2018); thus, researchers have been working diligently to identify the cause for low achievement and the solution increasing achievement (Schmid, 2018). Herman et al. (2008) presented a process frequently referred to as creating “turnaround schools” which consists of implementing effective strategies and practices intended to improve student achievement and overall school performance of chronically low-performing schools. Turnaround schools start as chronically poor performing schools with a large percentage of students failing to meet state proficiency standards in ELA and/or mathematics for two years (Herman et al., 2008). Conversely, turnaround schools demonstrate substantial student achievement within three years, in which there is a reduction in students failing to meet state proficiency standards by at least 10 percentage points while also exhibiting improvements in graduation rates and reducing their dropout rate by 10 or more percentage points (Herman et al., 2008). School improvement and school turnaround have similar goals geared toward improving outcomes. However, they are different in the aspect that the school turnaround process is rapid improvement that takes place within

three years, but the school improvement process is slow and steady taking place over time. Schools that adopt a turnaround model must attain state mandated indicator and percentage goals within three years. If they fail to attain those goals they face significant changes in staffing, state intervention, and school closure.

Not surprisingly, there is insufficient literature related to school counselors in school turnaround. One qualitative case study explored school counselor leadership throughout the turnaround process suggesting that school counselor involvement and the use of data evolves due to various impacts (Mayes, Dollahide & Young, 2018). The authors of the study noted that school counselor participants in their study emerged as leaders, took the initiative to provide exceptional comprehensive counseling programs, and perceived themselves as agents of change (Mayes, Dollahide & Young, 2018). Furthermore, they recognized the importance of collaboration in leadership as they focused on student success. The emerging themes of the study confirmed the active role of school counselors in the school turnaround process. School counselors can use leadership skills to implement comprehensive school counseling programs that are aligned with the ASCA National Model. School counselors can engage in consultation and collaboration to create relationships with educational and community stakeholders that foster affirmative academic, social-emotional, and career development for all students. Last but not least, school counselors can use data to influence student achievement and to document their contribution to student success. All of which are extremely important contributing factors on behalf of school counselors and their role in the turnaround process in low-performing schools.

Overview of the School Counseling Profession

Various historical and societal events have led to the ever-changing roles and responsibilities of school counselors over the years. In the late 1800s, the school counseling position emerged when the public education system created the role of the vocational counselor in response to the effects of the Industrial Revolution (Beesley, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 1997, 2001; Paisley & Borders, 1995). The vocational guidance movement is often credited to Frank Parsons, a social and political reformer from Boston (Brewer, 1918). Early vocational counselors were teachers who did not receive extra pay for their newly attributed duties as vocational counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997, 2001) but were expected to provide “six major services (orientation, assessment, information, counseling, placement, and follow-up) to students through what was defined as the service model” (Gysbers, 1990, p. 3). The ultimate goal of the service model was to prepare students for the workforce (Gysbers, 2001); thus, vocational counselors assisted students with identifying an appropriate field of work (Gysbers, 2001). This model posed problems because counseling services were not provided in elementary schools and there was no specification on how counselors should conduct their time during the workday (Gysbers, 1990).

Twentieth century vocational counselors were responsible for approximately 15 primary duties involving students in Grades 6-12 (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997). Counselors met with failing students to find out why they were failing and attempted to find remedies. In addition, vocational counselors maintained a cumulative record card to document meetings with students (often referred to as advising), consulted records of intelligence, urged students to stay in school, and interviewed “all students who were

leaving school to ensure understanding of the requirements for obtaining a work card” (Ginn, 1924, as cited in Gysbers & Henderson, 1997, p. 2).

Moving forward to the 1900s, counselor responsibilities evolved to assist struggling students, monitor attendance, develop character traits, teach socially appropriate behaviors, and assist students with the post-graduation transition into the workforce. School counseling was endorsed as a profession in 1913 by the National Vocational Guidance Association. The profession began to expand beyond a vocational focus in the 1920s, and educators started to recognize the need to acknowledge students’ social and emotional needs. It was not until the passage of the George-Deen Act in 1936 that additional funding for counseling services was provided for support. American humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1942) introduced the client-centered approach which encouraged counselors to empower their clients, as opposed to giving advice and offering solutions. This theory greatly influenced the school counseling field in the 1940s. In 1953, ASCA was founded to provide credentials, standards, and guidelines for school counselors in addition to highlighting the importance of the profession.

The work of school counselors became even more significant during the Space Race as fear and panic sparked among Americans. The Soviet Union appeared to be surpassing the United States in technological advancements and presumably outperforming the U.S. in the fields of science and mathematics. With the active Cold War and Russia’s launch of Sputnik in 1957, counselors were asked to make use of their training by “guiding” gifted students to science and mathematics fields with hopes of putting America back at the forefront of scientific achievements; thus, the term “guidance counselor” was instated. Title V of the National Defense Act of 1958 authorized funding

to provide professional development and hire additional counselors in schools (Baker, 2001; Wittmer, 2000). From 1958 to 1967, the number of middle and high school guidance counselors tripled (Wittmer, 2000) to aid in routing student talent into the sciences. Accordingly, the 1800s vocational counselor was exchanged with guidance counselors and the school counseling field was redefined as “pupil personnel” (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

The profession struck hard times during the 1970s and 1980s, as declining student enrollment and staff reductions resulted in school counselors at risk of being eliminated due to their inability to validate their roles in schools (Baker, 2001; Beesley, 2004); however, the developmental guidance movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to the reorganization of school counseling to include a school counseling curriculum or comprehensive school counseling program (Baker, 2000, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Comprehensive school counseling programs de-emphasize non-counseling duties and reactive interventions while promoting individual counseling and group activities that promote academic, career, and social-emotional development (Galassi & Akos, 2004). This “services approach” to counseling encourages counselors to establish programs with clearly identified goals and objectives instituted by subjective progression from prevention to diagnosis and management (Baker, 2000; Gysbers, 1990).

The 1980s also proved to be a period of intense evaluation not only for education but also for school counseling programs. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) was created in 1981 to establish educational standards that would certify counselor accreditation. There was now a uniform set of requirements for the educational background of school counselors

(CACREP, 2016). “CACREP accredits masters and doctoral degree programs in counseling and its specialties that are offered by colleges and universities in the United States and throughout the world” (CACREP, 2016, para. 1).

ASCA advocated for the enactment of the Elementary School Counseling Demonstration Act in 1993, which was later signed into law in 1995 (Paisley & Borders, 1995). The bill was created to advance elementary school counseling services and stated that elementary school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers “contribute to the personal growth, educational development, and emotional well-being of elementary school children by providing professional counseling, intervention, and referral services” (Elementary School Counseling Demonstration Act of 1995, para. 1). In addition, “this legislation called for student-counselor ratios not to exceed 250:1 and for 85% of the counselor’s time to be spent providing direct services to students, with no more than 15% of their time devoted to administrative tasks” (Baker, 2000, p. 23). Another influential bill to pass was “the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 which emphasized the role of school counselors as key players in delivering a comprehensive program that would assist students in the school-to-work transition” (Granello, 1999, p. 108).

School Counseling in the 21st Century

“For years, initiatives such as the Education Trust (1997) Transforming School Counseling Initiative and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model have raised the level of expectation for school counseling” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 43). “The Transforming School Counseling Initiative articulates the attitudes, skills, and knowledge professional school counselors need to successfully transition from

preservice to practice” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 44). The Transforming School Counseling Initiative’s initial purpose was “to improve school counseling practices at the graduate school level, placing more emphasis on advocacy, leadership, and academic success of all students, especially those in low-achieving middle and high schools” (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 43).

ASCA had a similar vision in mind regarding educational reform by developing standards “to better define the relationship of school counseling programs to the educational mission of schools” (Campbell & Dahir, 1997, para. 1). Further, “the standards encourage school counselors to assume a leadership role in school reform” (Bowers et al., 2001, p. 17). In 2003, ASCA introduced the National Model, a framework for school counseling programs.

The American School Counselor Association in collaboration with the Education Trust (1997) infused themes of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative throughout the National Model in addition to the integrated work of Gysbers and Henderson (2001), Johnson and Johnson (2002), and Myrick (2003). (Dahir & Stone, 2006, p. 44)

The National Model provides a flexible framework designed to meet student needs through the delivery of direct and indirect services which should account for at least 80% of the counselor’s time. Direct services include utilizing a school counseling core curriculum, providing individual student planning, recognizing and responding to mental health needs, and providing support and assistance to students and families in crisis. “Indirect services are provided on behalf of students as a result of the interactions of school counselors with others including referrals, consultation, and collaboration with

parents, teachers, and other community organizations” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2). The National Model is comprised of four components (define, manage, deliver, and assess) that are vital to the school’s academic mission and are designed to positively impact student achievement, attendance, and discipline (ASCA, 2019b). With this model as a basis, school counselors are supported in becoming the most efficient and supportive source of the educational and counseling process to their students (ASCA, n.d.). First, there are three sets of standards used to define the school counseling profession: ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success, ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors, and ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies (ASCA, 2019b). Each set of Standards assists new and experienced school counselors in developing, implementing, and assessing their comprehensive school counseling program to improve student outcomes (ASCA, 2019b). The school counseling program must be managed effectively and efficiently (ASCA, 2019b). Program planning tools are provided in the ASCA National Model to guide the design and implementation of school counseling programs in order to guarantee results (ASCA, 2019b).

Next, “school counselors deliver developmentally appropriate activities and services directly to students or indirectly for students as a result of the school counselor’s interaction with others” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 4). “These activities and services help students develop the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success and improve their achievement, attendance, and discipline” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 4). At last, “school counselors regularly assess their program to determine its effectiveness, inform improvements to their school counseling program design and delivery, and show how students are different as a result of the school counseling program” (ASCA, 2019b, para.

4). “School counselors also self-assess their own mindsets and behaviors to inform their professional development and annually participate in a school counselor performance appraisal with a qualified administrator” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 6).

ASCA National Standards for Students. “ASCA’s National Standards for Students identify and prioritize the specific attitudes, skills, and knowledge that students should be able to demonstrate as a result of participating in a school counseling program” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 8). “The development of the ASCA National Standards for Students required an examination of theory, research, and practice to ensure that all aspects of school counseling were considered” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 8).

National Standards for Students offers an opportunity for the school counseling profession to implement the goals deemed important by the profession, to promote its mission in educational reform, and to ensure that all students have access to comprehensive school counseling programs as part of the learning experience. (ASCA, 2019b, para. 8)

“School counselors implementing programs strive to have an impact on student growth in three domain areas: academic, career, and social/emotional development” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2). These areas, referred to as domains, “promote mindsets and behaviors that enhance the learning process and create a culture of college and career readiness for all students” (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2):

Academic Development—standards guiding school counseling programs to implement strategies and activities to support and maximize each student’s ability to learn.

Career Development—standards guiding school counseling programs to help

students (a) understand the connection between school and the world of work and (b) plan for and make a successful transition from school to postsecondary education and/or the world of work and from job to job across the lifespan.

Social/Emotional Development—standards guiding school counseling programs to help students manage emotions and learn and apply interpersonal skills. (ASCA, 2019b, para. 2)

ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors. “ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College- and Career Readiness are the next generation of the ASCA National Standards for Students” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 22). “There are 35 researched-based standards and best practices in student achievement from a wide array of educational standards and efforts” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 23). School counselors can use the 35 standards to “assess student growth and development, guide the development of strategies and activities, and create a program that helps students achieve their highest potential” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 23). To utilize the standards, school counselors must “select competencies that align with specific standards that become the foundation for classroom lessons, small groups, and activities addressing student developmental needs” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 23). The identified competencies should “directly reflect the vision, mission, and goals of the comprehensive school counseling program and align with the school’s academic mission” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 23). When assessing needs, school counselors must “select a domain and standard based on the needs of the school, classroom, small group, or individual” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 23). Further, school counselors develop comprehensive school counseling programs utilizing Mindsets and Behaviors Standards that focus on changing mindsets and behaviors of their students in order to improve academic

performance. “Mindset Standards are standards related to the psycho-social attitudes or beliefs students have about themselves in relation to academic work” (ASCA, 2019a, pp. 23-24). “Behavior Standards are standards that include behaviors commonly associated with being a successful student: learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 24). “These behaviors are visible, outward signs that a student is engaged in and putting forth an effort to learn” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 24).

As high school counselors continue to help students navigate their way through high school and enter into postsecondary education or the workforce, it is important that research continues to examine all facets of the profession to encourage growth. Since its introduction, the school counseling profession has made significant progress over the years with the help of research to support the effectiveness of the school counselor position. Accordingly, this study sought to provide an essential description of the roles and responsibilities of high school counselors in low-performing and high-performing schools and the effects their roles and responsibilities have on school performance.

Non-Counseling Duties

Although the ASCA National Model was established to be an integral contribution to comprehensive school counseling programs, limitations and obstacles insistently interfere with program implementation (Astramovich et al., 2013; Gysbers & Stanley, 2014). The most daunting obstacle for many school counselors is the assignment of non-counseling duties. Non-counseling duties not only impede school counselors’ ability to provide students with comprehensive school counseling services, they also diminish the importance of the comprehensive school counseling program and negatively impact school counselors’ self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can significantly influence the

perception of a school counselor's skills and abilities, in addition to their motivation, commitment, resilience, and perseverance (Cashwell & Dooley, 2001). School counselors with high levels of self-efficacy regard themselves as proficient professionals equipped to advocate for their professional roles and responsibilities (Barnes, 2004).

School counselor burnout has also been a researched concern as a result of non-counseling duties (Bardhoshi, 2012; Falls, 2009; Wachter, Clemens, & Lewis, 2008). All findings of the studies suggested that non-counseling duties are significantly related to "exhaustion and deterioration" resulting in school counselor burnout. Burnout is a multifaceted condition consisted of emotional exhaustion, detachment, and self-doubt due to an imbalance amid occupational demands and available resources to meet demands (Bardhoshi, 2012). Despite many school counselors perceiving non-counseling duties as a distraction from their counseling duties and services, some school counselors have learned to accept them as part of their responsibility to the school. Such duties are often viewed as fair share duties that some school counselors perceive as an opportunity to enhance their position in the school.

Most inappropriate school counseling duties portray school counselors as administrative assistants as opposed to leaders of systemic change. Unfortunately, "misunderstandings about appropriate school counseling duties exist" (Chandler et al., 2018, p. 4). For example, "counselors may be involved in inappropriate activities such as keeping and maintaining records, computing grade point averages, supervising classrooms, teaching classes when teachers are absent, and serving as a data entry clerk" (Mau et al., 2016, p. 85). Duties assigned by administration vary in the time it takes to complete them, which interferes with the ability of school counselors to prioritize

counseling duties on their daily calendar (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014) with more appropriate school counseling duties. Administrative and clerical duties are typically assigned over time and may appear to be counseling-related, i.e., school testing coordinator, 504 case manager, special education/gifted testing coordinator, or student records clerk (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014). Such tasks, in addition to all other non-counseling duties, are barriers to “working directly with students because they substantially reduce the time school counselors have to help all students become college and/or career ready” (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 24).

When assigning duties, the relationship between school counselors and administrators is especially crucial in determining the overall effectiveness of the school counseling program. Unfortunately, “studies conducted by ASCA and the National Association of Secondary School Principals suggest school administrators do not yet fully understand the value of the programmatic concept of school counseling and its benefits to students, the school, and the community” (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 24). Considering administrators typically determine school counselor responsibilities within a school, school counselor roles often do not match state or national standards for the profession; thus, “the realities experienced by most school counselors are not congruent with the ASCA National Model” (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 24). Further research is needed to explore the expectations and perceptions of high school counselors in low-performing schools to identify how they experience their non-counseling duties. A comprehensive list of ASCA identified appropriate and inappropriate activities for school counselors is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1*Appropriate and Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors*

Appropriate activities for school counselors	Inappropriate activities for school counselors
Advisement and appraisal for academic planning	Building the master schedule
Orientation, coordination, and academic advising for new students	Coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students
Interpreting cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests	Coordinating cognitive, aptitude, and achievement testing programs
Providing counseling to students who are tardy or absent	Signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent
Providing counseling to students who have disciplinary problems	Performing disciplinary actions or assigning discipline consequences
Providing short-term individual and small-group counseling services to students	Providing long-term counseling in schools to address psychological disorders
Consulting with teachers to schedule and present school counseling curriculum lessons based on developmental needs and needs identified through data	Covering classes when teachers are absent or to create teacher planning time
Interpreting student records	Maintaining student records
Analyzing grade-point averages in relationship to achievement	Computing grade point averages
Consulting with teachers about building classroom connections, effective classroom management, and the role of noncognitive factors in student success	Supervising classrooms or common areas
Protecting student records and information per state and federal regulations	Keeping clerical records
Consulting with the school principal to identify and resolve student issues, needs, and problems	Assisting with duties in the principal's office
Advocating for students at individual education plan meetings, student study teams, and school attendance review boards, as necessary	Coordinating schoolwide individual education plans, student study teams, response to intervention plans, MTSS, and school attendance review boards
Analyzing disaggregated schoolwide and school counseling program data	Serving as a data entry clerk

Note. Reprinted from *Appropriate and Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors*, by

American School Counselor Association, 2019a, Alexandria, VA.

([https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/8fe536c2-7a32-4102-8ce7-](https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/8fe536c2-7a32-4102-8ce7-42e9b0683b3b/appropriate-activities-of-school-counselors.pdf)

42e9b0683b3b/appropriate-activities-of-school-counselors.pdf) Copyright 2019 by

American School Counselor Association.

Role Conflict, Ambiguity, and Confusion

Roles provide a blueprint to guide performance and outline tasks and/or goals. In addition, roles guide behavior and influence beliefs that can change approaches to align with role expectations. Accordingly, role theory suggests that social behavior and collaboration regulate performance and behavior can be predicted with the understanding of role expectations (Crossman, 2021). Opposing obligations in a person's role produces role conflict. Role conflict often occurs when there are contradictions between a person's role and their assigned responsibilities. It is the result of an employee's attempt to execute various roles within one position (Bryant & Constantine, 2006). In some cases, conflict arises when incompatible roles are taken on that do not coincide with the belief and expectations a person has of themselves. Incompatible work demands along with mistreatment, unreasonable workload, and role ambiguity are widely studied variables in occupational stress literature. Role conflict is typically the result of managerial disconnect and is likely higher when supervisors fail to include employees in decision-making opportunities regarding employee responsibilities. Role conflict causes feelings of uncertainty, ineffectiveness, and the inability to fulfil role requirements. Research has revealed that school counselors are challenged with difficulty when deciding which services to prioritize (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Consequently, the absence of clearly defined guidelines and expectations for executing a

comprehensive school counseling program creates role ambiguity.

Like role conflict, role ambiguity is also identified as an occupational stressor. Employees experiencing role ambiguity are uncertain about appropriate and inappropriate tasks or responsibilities within their role. Further, employees are more likely to experience role ambiguity when they are not provided opportunities to create a unified work environment. It is indicative that role ambiguity is a result of poor management skills and practices. The correlation between role ambiguity and supervision dissatisfaction suggests that employees perceive leadership as the source of role ambiguity. Increased levels of role ambiguity are also related to unfavorable work conditions including lack of autonomy, constructive criticism, and job identity. It is not uncommon for employees to report both high levels of role ambiguity and role conflict. Role ambiguity has been present in professional literature since the 1990s (Aubrey, 1991; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Dahir, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, 2001; Herr, 2001; Sink & MacDonald, 1998). “Role ambiguity exists when there is not a clear understanding of the school counselor's role, even to the extent that school counselors may have varying perceptions regarding their role in the school environment” (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017, p. 52). In addition, there may be “a lack of clarity regarding professional objectives associated with the position and/or a lack of clarity about peer expectations of the scope and responsibility of the job” (Lambie, 2007, p. 84; Sears & Navin, 2001). In the school counseling field, role ambiguity results in

- (1) loss of time to perform actual counseling functions that benefit students (Day & Sparacio, 1980; DeMato & Curcio, 2004); (2) heightened stress (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2010; Sears & Navin, 2001); (3) higher

burnout and job attrition due to disenchantment with excessive non-counseling assignments (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Schmidt et al., 2001); and (4) reduced job performance (Fried et al., 1998). (Chandler et al., 2018, p. 7)

The misunderstanding or absence of information about the roles and responsibilities of a position is referred to as role confusion (Grissett, 2008). Many working professionals who experience role confusion report lower levels of professional efficacy, job satisfaction, compensation, and higher rates of burnout (Grissett, 2008). In an early study, Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) found that role confusion was often the result of “dual hierarchy” and “multiple lines of authority”. Role confusion is unmistakably evident in public school settings and especially prevalent among school counselors due to organizational factors (Grissett, 2008; Pepe, 2016). Role confusion affects work quality and is one of the most common obstacles school counselors face (Cawood, 2010; Grissett, 2008). Inherently, it deteriorates the effectiveness of school counselors. School counselors often struggle with their professional identity upon reviewing the long list of scattered and disconnected duties in which they are assigned (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014). The performance of these non-counseling school duties negatively affects the self-efficacy of school counselors (Jellison, 2013). School counselor self-efficacy is a cognitive process that influences a school counselor’s thoughts, decision-making, and service delivery (Bodenhorn et al., 2010; Owens et al., 2010). Negative self-efficacy can ultimately hinder the overall functioning of a school counseling program as it produces conflict regarding the counselor’s role in the school.

To determine the pervasiveness of school counselor duties, Dahir & Stone (2003) conducted a study with 1,244 school counselors that completed the Assessment of School

Counselor Needs for Professional Development (ASCNPD) (Chandler et al., 2018).

“Certain items on the ASCNPD (i.e., testing duties, scheduling, and excessive fair-share duties) were consistently identified as counseling duties or as other non-counseling duties, which indicates continued role confusion in the school counseling field” (Chandler et al., 2018, p. 44). Comparable school counselor confusion about appropriate and inappropriate assignments have been described in previous studies over the years (Astramovich et al., 2013; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Day & Sparacio, 1980; Hatch & Bowers, 2002). “Nelson et al. (2008) found that high school counselors reported spending much of their time on non-counseling duties, thus leaving them less time to provide counseling, consultation, and coordination services as recommended by national counseling models” (Astramovich et al., 2013, p. 177). School counseling models were relatively created to reinforce and illuminate school counselors’ professional identity, nevertheless the school counseling role in education is continuously questioned and developing (ASCA, 2019b; Keys et al., 1998; Whiston, 2002, 2004). “With the multitude of duties suggested by various school counseling models, role research in school counseling has often attempted to clarify what duties are expected of school counselors and how these should be prioritized” (Astramovich et al., 2013, p. 177). In light of past negative effects of role ambiguity, 21st century professional school counselors are afforded the ability to elucidate the school counselor’s role. “Focusing on the unique counseling skills of school counselors is the next critical step for the profession” (Astramovich et al., 2013, p. 184). In spite of the challenges related to role confusion, ambiguity and conflict, school counselors must continue to remain flexible while adapting to 21st century needs (Anderson & Reiter, 1995; Aubrey, 1991; Baker, 2001;

Chandler et al., 2018; Gladding, 2004; Gysbers, 2001; Herr, 2001; Sparks, 2003).

Accordingly, this study provided that opportunity to select high school counselors who contributed their experiences in hopes of advancing the school counseling profession.

The role of school counselors historically has been shrouded in ambiguity (Trolley, 2011; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), but this study provides direction for school counselors in their discussions with policymakers, stakeholders, and principals regarding their roles and responsibilities.

Evoking Change: A Theoretical Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory relates to factors that contribute to and influence learning outcomes. The theory describes interactions that occur within interconnected systems, referred to as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. First, the microsystem involves a child's personal relationships with individuals in their environment, such as parents, friends, teachers, and school counselors. How individuals in the microsystem interact with the child affects how the child develops. As the theory suggests, school counselors providing more nurturing and supportive interactions and relationships with their students will foster student success. Second, the mesosystem defines individual relationships within the child's microsystem. Positive interactions among individuals in a child's microsystem will have a positive effect on the child's development, while negative interactions will negatively affect the child's development and the relationships within the microsystem. This includes parent-teacher interactions regarding an academic or behavioral issue with a student. Third, the exosystem relates to any connections between two or more settings, one of which may not involve the developing child but affects them indirectly

nonetheless. The exosystem is composed of people and places the child does not directly interact with but may affect them indirectly. It includes extended family members, friends of friends, parent workplaces, and community neighborhoods. A student struggling with emotions after a parent loses their job is an example of a negative interaction within the student's exosystem. Another example of the exosystem includes student access to resources that supplement education, such as the library, bookstores, or computer labs. Next, the macrosystem includes sociopolitical factors that may have an effect on a child's environment, such as local and state school funding. The macrosystem is the largest and most distant collection of people and places, but it maintains significant influence on the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It consists of the child's cultural beliefs and values; precisely, their governing beliefs, ideas, political views, and economic classifications. Finally, the chronosystem embodies influential events that effect life span development. Consequently, relocation, divorce/marriage, a parent's loss of employment, or historical pandemics such as the novel coronavirus have the potential to negatively or positively affect students. Therefore, the availability of school counselors to provide support during such events is extremely significant. "The ultimate goal of [school] counseling is to enhance the fit between a student and their environment and to ensure that the [student] can operate successfully within their ecological niche" (Conyne & Cook, 2004, p. 21); Greenleaf & Williams, 2009). This does not imply that it is the student's responsibility to accommodate the environment, but the counselor must develop an ecological empathy of understanding the student within the student's environment (McMahon et al., 2014).

While the Ecological Systems Theory provides a perspective of the school counselor's role in the growth and development of students, the ASCA National Model

provides school counselors with a framework for a comprehensive school counseling program that is designed to “provide all students with experiences to help them grow and develop” (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, p. 26). “National Standards provide a framework for developing the content and writing of a school counseling program and are the foundation for the ASCA National Model” (ASCA, 2019a, p. 20). “The nine National Standards, three in each area of academic, career, and social/emotional development, are considered to be the essential foundation for the content for school counseling programs” (Campbell & Dahir, 1997, para. 2). “Student competencies define the knowledge, attitudes, and skills students should obtain and demonstrate in academic, career, and personal/social success as a result of participating in a standards-based school counseling program” (Campbell & Dahir, 1997, para. 4). School counselors should identify student competencies that not only support individual student achievement but competencies that also support school improvement goals. Considering the vastness of such responsibilities, it is imperative that school counselors spend more time focusing on the pertinent aspects of their professional role and less time on non-counseling-related duties.

“Fully implemented and accountable school counseling programs do not happen overnight, and school counselors cannot do this work alone” (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 24). To promote consistency and reduce role ambiguity, school counselors must be advocates acting as leaders within their schools and taking action in their communities. Further, school counselors must be able and willing “to become advocates for full program implementation and evaluation by using data to give regular presentations to their administration and local boards of education demonstrating the impact of their program on critical markers of student success” (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 25). “The

value of school counselors and the comprehensive school counseling program will be strengthened when clearly defined counselor roles, data-driven programming, and measurable outcomes become present” (Dahir & Stone, 2013, p. 6; Clark & Amatea, 2004; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Perusse et al., 2004; Stone & Dahir, 2006).

“The development of the ASCA National Model has been a catalyst for change that encouraged the evolution of the profession by offering guidance for implementing effective school counseling practices and encouraged professionalism” (Davis, 2005, p. 6). The National Model (ASCA, 2019b) also provides school counselors with “well-defined structures to guide their counseling activities with students” (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012, p. 10; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Dahir, 2004; Davis, 2005).

Additionally,

the ASCA National Model and the ASCA mindsets and behaviors provide a national framework for comprehensive data-driven counseling programs, incorporating the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students in an effort to promote the well-being of all students and increase student academic performance. (ASCA, 2019b, para. 3)

“Research indicates that school counselors who utilized a comprehensive program had higher levels of job satisfaction, lower levels of burnout, and students with higher grades and better peer interactions” (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017, p. 23); however, there are various factors that affect the implementation of a school counseling program. Factors include but are not limited to administrative support, role conflict, role ambiguity, and inappropriate job duties.

Research has consistently confirmed the effectiveness of school counselors and

the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs that contribute to academic success and improved behavior (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Salina et al., 2013; Villares et al., 2011; Wilkerson et al., 2013). Just as Abraham Maslow (1968) called for a more comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to human problems, comprehensive school counseling programs should focus on integrated holistic cognitive, behavioral, and effective approaches to equip students for success (Villares et al., 2011). This approach mirrors humanistic-inspired references presented by Maslow asserting that the introduction to critical skills will modify systems (schools) and produce student growth and development. Furthermore, it is equally important to acknowledge that environmental factors also contribute to the growth and development of systems as a result of the relationships and interactions within the system. School counseling programs that are in mutual agreement with the school's mission and goals take into consideration the environmental factors that either hinder or support student success. Accordingly, school counselors see students in context through an ecological model. The ecological model provides a theory for personal awareness, development, and experiences in terms of the support and structure in society to explain change and the effect of individual choices over time. Consequently, the ecological model explains how individual student choices ultimately affect schools as a whole. For this reason, it is pertinent that school counselors devote their time to assessing student needs, building relationships that result in positive interactions, and implementing programs that address individual needs in order to influence student outcomes.

Conclusion

“As the role of the secondary school counselor continually evolves to meet the growing and ever-changing needs and expectations of the school community, the importance of the comprehensive school counseling program remains consistent” (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017, p. 33). “School counselors can initiate, develop, lead, and coordinate programs that can contribute to systemic change and improved learning success for every student” (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 19). “Acting as agents of school and community change, school counselors can create a climate where access and support for quality and rigor are the norms” (Stone & Dahir, 2007, p. 15; Lapan, 2005). “With an accountable, data-driven school counseling program, school counselors will be seen as powerful partners and collaborators in school improvement and champions of social justice bent on narrowing the opportunity and achievement gap” (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 19; Johnson et al., 2006; Stone & Dahir, 2006). “Change will occur when school counselors clarify their roles, prove their dependability, hold high expectations, and use data to build appropriate support systems” (Salina et al., 2013, p. 74). Furthermore, “building trusting relationships at all levels between administration and staff, staff and staff, and staff and students is key in improving low-performing schools” (Salina et al., 2013, p. 74). Most importantly, school counselors must redefine their roles to include being accountable for the academic performance of their students. The shift will take place when school counselors assume their leadership roles and collaborate with the administration and staff in order to evoke change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Given the national dialogue about education reform, little is known about the role of school counselors, the contributions they make to improve student outcomes, and how their skill sets can affect the academic success of students” (Hines et al., 2017, p. 3). Accordingly, this study explored the experiences of school counselors in low-performing high schools in Virginia. The general purpose of this mixed-methods study was to gain a deeper insight into high school counselor roles and responsibilities and discover the essence of the lived experiences of counselors in their schools. This study sought to extract pure, untainted data to obtain the personal experiences and perspectives of high school counselors. Accordingly, this study provides descriptions of high school counselor experiences within low-performing schools and a survey of school counselor responsibilities and duties.

Research Design

The research design was selected based on my philosophical pragmatic worldview. A “worldview is a general philosophical orientation about the world and nature of research that a researcher brings to a study” (Creswell, 2018, p. 12). Pragmatism arises out of actions, situations, and consequences while focusing on what works and solutions to problems (Creswell, 2018). “Instead of focusing on methods, pragmatist researchers emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand the problem” (Rossman & Wilson, 1985, p. 628). “Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality” (Creswell, 2018, p. 15). “It opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions as well as different forms of data collection and analysis” (Creswell, 2018, p. 15). This

applies to the mixed methods design in that researchers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when conducting research (Creswell, 2018). Accordingly, this study utilized a mixed methods design to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data that will aid in the understanding of the role and impact of high school counselors in low-performing schools. There are various terms used for “this approach such as integrating, synthesis, quantitative and qualitative methods, multimethod, and mixed methodology, but the term mixed methods is used in most recent writings” (Tashakkorie & Teddlie, 2010, p. 118). Considered a fairly new methodology, “mixed methods originated around the late 1980s and early 1990s based on works from individuals in diverse fields such as evaluation, education, management, sociology, and health sciences” (Creswell, 2018, p. 188). This approach is often deemed most appropriate due to “its strength of drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research and minimizing the limitations of both and its usefulness in providing a more complete understanding of research problems and questions” (Creswell, 2018, p. 188). Further, the mixed methods approach enables the researcher to capture trends and complex details related to the essential role of high school counselors. “Used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods permit a more thorough analysis of the research questions taking into consideration that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods alone were sufficient to extract significant details in this particular study” (Creswell, 2018, pp. 188-189). “The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data neutralizes the weakness of each form of data, thus triangulating the data sources for convergence across both methods” (Creswell, 2018, p. 189).

This study utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods design in which

quantitative and qualitative data are converged to provide the researcher with a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. “The key idea with this design is to collect both forms of data using the same parallel variables, constructs, or concepts” (Creswell, 2018, p. 190). Upon collection of both forms of data, the data are analyzed separately and then merged before interpretation. There are several ways to merge the two sets of data: side-by-side comparison, transformation, or joint display of data. For purposes of this study, the side-by-side comparison was used to merge the two data sets. In convergent parallel designs, contradictions and incongruent findings are explained and further probed (Creswell, 2018).

Study Population

Schools of interest to this study had at least one quality indicator (chronic absenteeism, dropout rate, and graduation and completion index) rating of Level 3 (L3) per the Virginia Department of Education. A total of 38 high schools were identified as low-performing due to having at least one quality indicator rating below state recommended standards. Table 2 outlines the number of high schools with an L3 rating in a quality indicator area. Of the 38 schools with one L3 rating, five schools received an L3 rating for two indicators, while four schools received an L3 rating for all three quality indicators. School counselors at all 38 high schools were invited to participate in the study.

Table 2*Student Engagement and Outcomes State Summary*

Quality indicator	Number of schools with an L3 rating
Chronic absenteeism	16
Dropout rate	28
Graduation and completion index	7

Participants

Fifty-two high school counselors ranging in level of experience, age, ethnicity, and gender throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia participated in the study. Participants were asked to provide select background information regarding their current job title and length of time in their current position. To be eligible, participants had to (a) be employed as a high school counselor with at least 1 year of high school counseling experience, (b) be employed at a high school with at least one L3 rating, and (c) be willing to participate in a recorded interview via an online video-conferencing platform for approximately 45 minutes.

Of the 52 participants, five opted to share their experiences about working in their high schools. Interview participants represented a demographically diverse range of ages, ethnicities, work experiences, and education levels as well as both male and female perspectives. All participants were required to sign the university's informed consent (see Appendix A) agreeing to the provisions of the study prior to providing information. The informed consent form noted that participation in the study was voluntary. Likewise, participants were informed about the purpose and significance of the study as it relates to school counselors. There were no anticipated risks to participants beyond those

encountered during a normal workday. I did not request sensitive information that may damage the participants' reputations or were the data linked to any of the participants' work settings. Research findings were shared with participants upon completion of the study.

Sampling Method

Interview participants were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive or purposeful sampling is

a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher based upon a variety of criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the research issue or capacity and willingness to participate in the research. (Oliver, 2013, para. 1)

“A purposive sample is one in which the participants and the sites are selected intentionally to understand the central phenomenon under study as it is experienced by those specific participants at those research sites” (Creswell, 2013, p. 31). Purposive sampling enabled me to select information-rich samples from school counselors that can provide purposeful insight. Maxwell (2005) implied that “the technique of purposive sampling involves deliberately choosing participants from the population who can provide the researcher with the most useful information” (p. 58). Accordingly, I purposefully sampled high school counselors based on characteristics (age, race/ethnicity, gender); locality (rural, urban, suburban); and qualifications (years of experience, level of education) to ensure a well-rounded selection of participants.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used in this study assisted me in obtaining information to

describe a phenomenon. “The phenomenon is the object of investigation, not the participant, although the participant is required to describe the phenomenon” (Englander, 2012, p. 15); hence, “research is an occasion to become acquainted with the phenomenon, not an attempt to become acquainted with the participant in all their complexity” (Englander, 2012, pp. 15-16). The interview served as the primary qualitative data collection method (Englander, 2012).

Assessment for School Counselor Needs for Professional Development

An adapted version of the Assessment for School Counselor Needs for Professional Development [ASCNPD] was used to survey participants. The ASCNPD (see Appendix B) survey offers a quantitative measure of the beliefs, priorities, and practices of school counselors. A potential strength of this instrument is the use of subscales to pinpoint specifically which of these are in place and which need improvement (i.e., limitations, problem areas; Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008). “The ASCNPD survey was developed by Dahir and Stone (2003) to assess the professional development needs of school counselors in a high school district in New York City” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 51). “The original ASCNPD survey has 57 items representing key concepts and repeated themes that were revealed in the school counseling literature after an extensive review conducted by the survey developers” (Dahir & Stone, 2003, para. 287). The survey comprises six components: “school counseling priorities, school setting perceptions, personal-social development, career development, academic development, and program management” (Dahir & Stone, 2003, para. 287). “The ASCNPD has been used extensively to collect data and establish a baseline regarding attitudes, beliefs, and practices of school counselors” (Dahir et al.,

2010, p. 287). The ASCNPD used in the current study was cross-sectional and requested demographic information from respondents including age, race/ethnicity, gender, years of experience, level of education, and high school setting/location.

“The School Counseling Priorities subscale has 18 items and assesses the degree of the relative importance of school counselor priorities” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 53). “The items are defined as activities and tasks that contribute to the overall well-being and needs of a school, as defined in the ASCA National Model” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 53). Examples include the following: “Use data to identify specific areas of school improvement,” “School counselors advocate to change policies and practices that can negatively impact student success,” and “Evaluate the school counseling program effort to raise academic performance.”

The School Setting Perceptions subscale has 20 items and includes items that assess respondent beliefs regarding appropriate roles for school counselors, such as “School counselors are viewed as leaders” and “School counselors develop strategies to change systems and practices that impede student success.” (Dahir et al., 2010, p. 288)

In addition, several items ask the respondents to address collaboration and consultation roles, such as “Teachers work with school counselors to improve student achievement” and “School counselors work with faculty and administration to improve the school climate.”

Student development is addressed with 18 items represented by three subscales: personal-social development, career and postsecondary development, and academic development.

The Personal-Social Development subscale has eight items and assesses the practices of school counselors regarding the importance of strategies and activities that assist students to develop relationships, cope and understand emotional issues, respect self and others, and make positive transitions. (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 6)

Examples include “managing emotions (stress, anger, coping),” “decision-making skills,” “personal/social issues,” and “diversity issues.” “This subscale is aligned with the personal/social domain in the ASCA National Standards included in the National Model” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 6). “The Career and Post-Secondary Development subscale consists of five items that examine the degree to which school counselors assist students with career awareness, career exploration, and post-secondary planning” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 7). “The items are aligned with the career development domain of the National Standards” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 7). Examples include “college admissions strategies” and “Help students identify their future educational and career options.” “The Academic Development subscale has five items and assesses the priorities school counselors place on program strategies and activities that support and maximize student learning” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 7). “This section follows the academic domain from the ASCA National Model” (Burnham, Dahir, Stone et al., 2008, p. 7). Sample items from this subscale include “study skills,” “improving grades,” and “test-taking strategies.”

“The Program Management subscale has 22 items that assess school counselor involvement in system support activities that provide ongoing support to the school environment and also administrative expectations regarding tasks, some of which are

considered as non-counseling responsibilities” (Chandler et al., 2008, p. 50; Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Sample items from this subscale include “scheduling courses,” “four-year education plans,” and “test interpretation.”

“An analysis of the psychometric properties of ASCNPD (Burnham et al., 2008) showed high evidence of validity and reliability” (Feirsen et al., 2021, p. 10). “Validity refers to the degree to which an instrument accurately assesses the specific concept or construct the researcher is attempting to measure” (Thorndike, 1997, p. 88). Score reliabilities of the ASCNPD survey component “correlations among the subscales were all moderate to high, ranging from .20 to .57 (all $p < .01$)” (Feirsen et al., 2021, p. 10). Internal consistency was assessed by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient and was found to be an acceptable range (.69 to .94) for an exploratory study.

Demographic Questionnaire

Five participants were selected for interviews based on specific characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, age); locality (rural, urban, suburban); and qualifications (years of experience, level of education) identified on the ASCNPD survey. In order to prepare for the semi-structured interview, consenting participants were asked to complete an in-depth demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C) to provide me with contextual background information. The questionnaire collected a variety of specific and detailed information including current counseling roles and duties. The questions were presented on the demographic questionnaire as opposed to during the interview so participants could utilize the interview session to focus on discussing their experiences rather than recalling daily tasks.

Interview

Five interview participants agreed to partake in virtual semi-structured interviews conducted by me, as I served as the data collecting instrument for this study. “Qualitative data collection via the Internet has the advantages of cost and time efficiency in terms of reduced costs for travel and data transcription” (Creswell, 2013, p. 68). Furthermore, “online data collection helps create a non-threatening and comfortable environment and provides greater ease for participants to discuss sensitive issues” (Nicholas et al., 2010, p. 110). More importantly, “online data collection offers an alternative for hard-to-reach groups (due to practical constraints, disability, or language or communication barriers) that may be marginalized from qualitative research” (James & Busher, 2007, p. 108).

An interview protocol (see Appendix D) was used to guide the interview process. The interview guide consisted of an outline of the interview, including the seven open-ended interview questions. “Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional” (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). Few questions are needed and they are presented in ranging form, starting with “grand tour” (Spradley, 1979, 1980) questions such as, “Tell me about yourself,” to more specific questions. The first overarching question specifically asked for a description of the high school counselors’ experience working at an L3-rated school. After exploring the question in-depth, I proceeded with the second question, “How has your experience as a school counselor impacted student engagement?” Following participant responses, I asked for clarification; however, the first two questions made up the semi-structured interview to obtain the necessary information pertaining to the phenomenon. The remaining sub-questions further explored the phenomenon before concluding the interview. The sub-questions helped to establish

the components of the “essence” of the study.

Research Questions and Alignment

Table 3 outlines the research questions this study explored utilizing the identified instruments to obtain data for analysis.

Table 3

Research Questions, Instruments, Data Collection, and Analysis Alignment

Research question	Instrument	Data collected	Analysis method
What are the experiences of high school counselors who work in low-performing schools?	ASCNPD Survey	Baseline data regarding the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of school counselors	Descriptive statistics, chi-square goodness of fit
How do high school counselors perceive the impact of their roles and responsibilities on student engagement and outcomes, i.e., absenteeism, dropouts, and graduation and completion?	Virtual Semi-structured Interview	Perception data	Six-step procedure: organize, review, and code raw data; identify themes, interrelating themes, and interpret the meanings

Mixed Methods Data Collection

Permission to conduct research using human subjects was obtained from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to collecting data. I utilized multiple data sources including a survey, demographic questionnaire, and interviews for triangulation to verify themes. Maxwell (2005) concurred, saying triangulation “reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific collection method” (p. 93).

Quantitative Data Collection

Upon receiving IRB approval, individual high school counselors at 38 L3-rated

schools were contacted via email with an invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix E). I utilized the January 2021 edition of the High School Counselor Directory to identify school counselors at the L3 schools rated by the Virginia Department of Education. The High School Counselor Directory is a publication of all high school counselors at public and private schools in Virginia listed by region. The email to prospective participants included an introduction outlining the purpose of the study, time requirements, informed consent letter, my contact information, and a link to the Qualtrics website in order to complete the ASCNPD. The survey included a question asking if participants were willing to participate in a virtual interview at a later date. Four follow-up emails were sent to recipients. I closed the survey for responses upon receiving a total of 52 responses.

Qualitative Data Collection

Upon receipt of the informed consent and an affirming survey response to take part in an interview, interview participants were provided with a comprehensive demographic questionnaire to submit prior to their interview. Next, I sent the participants a calendar invitation that included a link for the recorded interview. For confidentiality purposes, interview participants were assigned a pseudonym on their demographic questionnaire for reference and identification throughout the study. Participants were asked to provide their years of experience, length of time in their current position, age, race/ethnicity, and gender. Semi-structured virtual interviews were approximately 45 minutes long and followed an interview protocol (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview protocol included open-ended prompts and questions that encouraged participants to describe their roles and responsibilities. Identifiable data were replaced

with pseudonyms in the interview report to protect participant identity. The recorded interviews were thoroughly reviewed to gain a fuller perspective of participant experiences through their own words (Holloway, 1997). All interviews were transcribed for member checking. Upon completion of the transcription process, participants were emailed a copy to review the transcription and provide feedback or additional comments in order to obtain credibility and trustworthiness. “Member checking provides a way for the researcher to ensure the accurate portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

Mixed Methods Data Analysis

A side-by-side comparison was used to analyze collected quantitative and qualitative data. This approach is noted as a side-by-side approach because a comparison is made within a discussion, presenting first one set of findings and then the other (Creswell, 2018). Quantitative statistical results are reported first, followed by a report of qualitative themes that confirmed the reported statistical results. The concept is designed to display both forms of data, effectively merging them into a single visual (Creswell, 2018). Comparisons are discussed in Chapter 5.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis explored the perceptions, priorities, and program management expectations among high school counselors in low-performing schools. Simple descriptive statistics, including percentages and cross-tabulations, were utilized to organize and sort the data. A chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted to determine if the sample population was representative of the school counselor population in

comparison to previously surveyed high school counselors in another state.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis examined the impact of high school counselor roles and responsibilities in the school counseling program implementation process. “Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding, condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Grounded theory research follows systematic analysis steps (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Table 4 outlines a linear approach of the six steps used to analyze qualitative data.

Table 4

Data Analysis in Qualitative Research

Step	Description
1. Organize and prepare data for analysis	Raw interview data will be transcribed and field notes formally typed.
2. Data review	Read through all of the data to obtain a general sense of the information and an opportunity to reflect on its overall meaning.
3. Data coding	Organize the data into categories and label them with a term based on the actual language of the participant (in vivo term). A combination of emerging and predetermined codes will be used.
4. Identify themes	Refer to the categories to identify five to seven themes and form theme connections.
5. Interrelating themes	Use of a process model for a detailed discussion of the interconnecting themes.
6. Interpret the meaning of themes	Make an interpretation of the findings by asking, “What were the lessons learned?” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich, thick descriptions will be used to convey the findings.

The final step of data analysis involves making an interpretation of the results. This process can take many forms, adapt to different designs, and convey personal research-based meanings (Creswell, 2018). For purposes of this study, I used a theoretical lens to form an interpretation based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory in relation to the work of high school counselors. In addition, a comparison narrative of the findings is also provided with information derived from the literature to suggest new questions that need to be asked based on the data and analysis from the current study.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "the trustworthiness of a research study is the central aspect of the issues that are conventionally called validity and reliability" (p. 296). "Validity in qualitative research can have different meanings such as rigor, trustworthiness, appropriateness, and even quality, and it can be described in a great variety of terms" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). In fact, Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) proposed "the replacement of the term validity in qualitative research with trustworthiness or rigor" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). "Without rigor, research would be worthless or, even worse, it would be a fictional piece" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 15). The credibility of a study is necessary to authenticate that the research results are believable and that "the data speak to the findings" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). In accordance, methods and strategies such as triangulation and member checking were used to ensure the accuracy of the results and to establish credibility and trustworthiness.

Triangulation

Triangulation "consists of the interrelationship between the information obtained from the data that were collected from different sources to increase the understanding of

the study in question, thus improving the reliability of the results” (Hayashi et al., 2019, p. 108). Patton (2014) referenced the triangulation of methods as “verifying the consistency of results produced by combining multiple methods of data collection such as documents, interviews, observations, questionnaires, or surveys when conducting research” (p. 150). “Triangulation of different data collection methods bolsters the trustworthiness of a qualitative study by giving numerous frames of references and multiple sources from which the data were obtained” (Denzin, 1978, 201). Data for this study were obtained via a survey, demographic questionnaires, and individual interviews to “triangulate information and provide validity of the findings” (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2014). An audit trail consisting of transcripts and field notes was maintained to “validate the rigor of the study and to certify data collection” (Patton, 2014). This process confirms “evidence from different sources to illuminate a theme or viewpoint” (Creswell, 2013).

Member Checking

“Member checking is an integral part of creating trustworthiness in qualitative research” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296; Creswell & Miller, 2000); Stake, 1995). Further, it “provides a way for the researcher to ensure the accurate portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). “Member checking is an integral technique to ensure the study’s credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297; Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999). Accordingly, participants were asked to review a transcript of their interview for “accuracy, clarification, and additional insight to

enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the results” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Loh, 2013). Participants confirmed the accuracy of my transcript dialogue and were given the opportunity to make changes or add more information to the transcript.

Summary

This mixed methods study aimed to explore the perceptions of high school counselors regarding their duties and the effectiveness of their roles in low-performing schools. Fifty-two participants completed an adapted version of the ASCPND survey via Qualtrics. Five of the 52 participants participated in individual interviews with me. Interview participants were required to complete a comprehensive demographic questionnaire prior to their virtual semi-structured interview. An interview protocol with open-ended questions guided the recorded interviews as participants described their roles and experiences as high school counselors in low-performing schools. A side-by-side comparison was used to confirm statistical results upon the review of the qualitative findings. Finally, I provided an interpretation of the findings to capture the essence of the high school counselor experience in low-performing schools. To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, triangulation and member checking were implemented within the study.

Chapter 4: Results

This mixed-methods study aimed to explore the perceptions of high school counselors regarding their duties and the effectiveness of their roles in low-performing schools. A survey, a demographic questionnaire, and virtual interviews were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding the way in which high school counselors experience their roles and non-counseling duties in low-performing high schools in Virginia. This chapter presents key findings obtained from the survey, demographic questionnaire, and five interviews. Quantitative data analysis explores the priorities, perceptions, and program management beliefs among high school counselors in low-performing schools in which descriptive statistics are reported. Qualitative data analysis examines the impact of high school counselor roles and responsibilities in the school counseling program implementation process. Interviewee demographic information is reported followed by common descriptive characteristics among the interview participants. Finally, research questions are restated followed by a result analysis for each question. Further discussion of analysis findings will occur in Chapter 5.

Demographic Information

Fifty-two (N=52) professional school counselors from one of 38 Virginia high schools identified as low-performing participated in this study. Each participant completed an adapted version of the ASCNPD (Appendix B) survey by way of Qualtrics, an online survey software. Five survey completers also volunteered to partake in a virtual interview to further expound on their experience as a high school counselor in a low-performing high school. Upon agreeing to participate in the virtual interview, the five participants were emailed a link to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C)

prior to their interview. The questionnaire solicited the following information from each candidate: age range, race/ethnicity, gender, professional memberships/certifications, number of years as a high school counselor, number of years at current high school/district, number of faculty on staff/student enrollment, caseload number, school socioeconomic makeup, student minority makeup, percentage of exceptional students, and a listing of all assigned counseling and non-counseling duties performed at their respective schools.

Quantitative Findings

Priorities, Perceptions, and Program Management

With a focus on high school counselor priorities, perceptions, and program management tasks, I solicited responses via an anonymous survey divided into three subgroups: school counseling priorities, school setting perceptions, and program management. Descriptive statistics provided in Tables 5 through 7 display participant response percentages by item. Interpretations of these findings are discussed in Chapter 5.

Priorities. The school counseling priorities subgroup contains 18 items regarding the importance of high school counselor activities and tasks. Table 5 displays participant results for each item.

Table 5*Subgroup 1: School Counseling Priorities (N=52)*

How important are each of the following activities or tasks for school counselors in your high school setting?	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
1. Advocate to change policies and practices that can negatively impact student success.	3.33%	30%	66.67%
2. Help teachers improve classroom management skills.	76.67%	13.33%	10%
3. Counsel students individually about social/emotional issues.	3.33%	3.33%	93.33%
4. Improve student access to academic support services.	3.33%	6.67%	90%
5. Evaluate the school counseling program effort to raise academic performance.	3.33%	30%	66.67%
6. Develop strategies to change policies and practices that negatively impact student success.	10%	13.33%	76.67%
7. Use data to identify specific areas of school improvement.	20%	36.67%	43.33%
8. Work with administrators and teachers on school improvement issues.	20%	33.33%	46.67%
9. Reduce social/institutional barriers that keep students from achieving their potential.	0%	43.33%	56.67%
10. Develop and implement prevention programs.	10%	40%	50%
11. Serve on school/district committees.	33.33%	40%	26.67%
12. Participate in academic department or grade-level meetings.	46.67%	30%	23.33%
13. Monitor student academic performance.	3.33%	16.67%	80%
14. Work with students in small groups on social/emotional issues.	10%	36.67%	53.33%
15. Deliver classroom lessons on a variety of grade-level-appropriate topics.	33.33%	30%	36.67%
16. Counsel students who have behavioral problems in classes.	20%	30%	50%
17. Assist teachers with improving classroom management.	76.67%	13.33%	10%
18. Refer students to community professionals for mental health problems.	3.33%	23.33%	73.33%

As evident by responses, participants prioritize student academic performance and social-emotional counseling (Items 3, 4, and 13) more so than assisting teachers with classroom management (Items 2 and 17), whereas participants were equally divided in regard to prioritizing counseling with students for behavioral issues and developing/implementing prevention programs (Items 10 and 16).

Perceptions. The school setting perceptions subgroup contains 16 items that indicate the extent of participant experiences in their high school setting. Table 6 displays participant results for each item.

Table 6*Subgroup 2: School Setting Perceptions (N=52)*

Please indicate the extent to which, in your observations and experiences in the high school setting, each of the following statements is accurate.	Somewhat accurate	Accurate	Very accurate
1. High school counselors regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators.	0%	13.33%	86.67%
2. Teachers and counselors work together to identify students who are not performing to their best level.	6.67%	30%	63.33%
3. School counselors work with faculty and administration to improve the school climate.	26.67%	46.67%	26.67%
4. High school counselors are viewed as school leaders.	46.67%	36.67%	16.67%
5. School counselors are part of key decision-making teams.	53.33%	26.67%	20%
6. Administrators work with school counselors to increase student academic performance.	36.67%	33.33%	30%
7. School counselors provide leadership to promote every student's right to a quality education.	20%	46.67%	33.33%
8. Teachers and high school counselor's work together to improve student achievement.	23.33%	46.67%	30%
9. School counselors use school data to assess student performance and develop necessary services.	20%	33.33%	46.67%
10. I have established strong collaborative relationships with local community organizations and agencies.	44.83%	34.48%	20.69%
11. School counselors reduce social/institutional barriers that keep students from achieving success.	23.33%	40%	36.67%
12. School counselors are increasing the participation of underrepresented students in higher-level academics such as honors, IB, AP classes.	23.33%	33.33%	43.33%
13. Teachers regularly send students to the school counselor to deal with personal problems.	6.90%	37.93%	55.17%
14. School counselors provide group counseling based on identified student needs.	40%	40%	20%
15. Provide professional development activities to teachers.	79.31%	13.79%	6.90%
16. Use grades to identify under-performing students.	10%	40%	50%

Nearly 87% of participants reported that they regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators (Item 1). Fifty percent of participants reported that they use grades to identify underperforming students (Item 16). Less than 17% of high school counselors believe they are viewed as leaders (Item 4), while less than 7% provide professional development activities to teachers (Item 15).

Program Management. The program management subgroup contains three items that indicate the extent of participant program management practices in their high school. Table 7 displays participant results for each item.

Table 7

Subgroup 3: Program Management (N=52)

Based on your observations and experiences in your high school setting, indicate the extent each of the following statements is accurate.	Somewhat accurate	Accurate	Very accurate
1. School counselors deliver guidance programs in classes.	41.38%	31.03%	27.59%
2. School counselors use the national standards for school counseling programs to deliver specific student competencies in academic, career, and social-emotional development.	27.59%	34.48%	37.93%
3. School counselors monitor and evaluate the impact of the school counseling program on student achievement and success.	27.59%	34.48%	37.93%

A little less than 38% of high school counselors reported that they use national standards for school counseling programs to deliver specific student competencies in academic, career, and social-emotional development (Item 2), in addition to monitoring and evaluating the impact of their school counseling program on student achievement and success (Item 3).

Chi-Square Goodness of Fit

A Chi-square goodness of fit test was performed to determine if the current study population had the same distribution as a previously surveyed school counselor population in Alabama where school counselors had high ratings in areas related to leadership, collaboration, and school improvement (Appendix F). Survey items targeting high school counselor perceptions specifically related to school counselor leadership, collaboration with administrators and teachers, and school improvement were selected for analysis. A null hypothesis was formulated to determine whether or not the proportion of Virginia high school counselors' perceptions differed from the proportion of Alabama high school counselors' perceptions. The null hypothesis (H_0) states, "The high school counselor distribution in Virginia does not differ." Table 8 displays p -values for the specified survey items to either reject or fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 8*Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Calculations*

Item	Test result
<u>Leadership</u>	
High school counselors are viewed as school leaders.	$X^2(2, N=52)=33.38, p=0$
Provide professional development activities to teachers.	$X^2(2, N=52)=18.78, p=.008$
Help teachers improve classroom management skills.	$X^2(2, N=52)=20.82, p=.003$
<u>Collaboration</u>	
High school counselors regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators.	$X^2(2, N=52)=3.5, p=.173$
School counselors work with faculty and administration to improve the school climate.	$X^2(2, N=52)=59.33, p=0$
School counselors are part of key decision-making teams.	$X^2(2, N=52)=78.07, p=0$
<u>School Improvement</u>	
Administrators work with school counselors to increase student academic performance.	$X^2(2, N=52)=402.1, p=0$
Use data to identify specific areas of school improvement.	$X^2(2, N=52)=25.21, p=.000$
Work with administrators and teachers on school improvement issues.	$X^2(2, N=52)=152.5, p=0$

Leadership

Since the p -value of each leadership item is less than alpha 0.01, I reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the high school counselor distribution in Virginia is different than the high school counselor distribution in Alabama. Based on survey responses and chi-square goodness of fit calculations, a significant percent of Virginia high school counselors who participated in this study did not perceive themselves as

leaders in their current position.

Collaboration

Two items in the collaboration sub-group yielded p -values less than alpha 0.01, in which I reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the high school counselor distribution in Virginia is different than the high school counselor distribution in Alabama. Based on survey responses and chi-square goodness of fit calculations, a significant percent of Virginia high school counselors who participated in this study did not perceive themselves as collaborators with faculty, administration, or decision-making teams working together to improve school climate.

However, there was not a significant difference between the proportion of Virginia and Alabama high school counselors that reported that they regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators. With a p -value greater than alpha 0.01, I fail to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the high school counselor distribution in Virginia is not significantly different from the high school counselor distribution in Alabama. Accordingly, high school counselors in both Virginia and Alabama regularly consult with parents, teachers, and administrators.

School Improvement

Since the p -value of each school improvement item is less than alpha 0.01, I reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the high school counselor distribution in Virginia is different than the high school counselor distribution in Alabama. Based on survey responses and chi-square goodness of fit calculations, a significant percent of Virginia high school counselors who participated in this study did not report collaborative relationships with administrators that specifically address school improvement.

Summary of Quantitative Findings

Based on survey responses, a small representation of high school counselors perceive themselves as leaders with the ability to provide professional development or classroom management strategies for their schools; however, percentages were high in regard to promoting academic success and addressing social/emotional issues with students. In addition, collaboration and consultation were also highly reported.

A Chi-square goodness of fit test was performed to determine whether the distribution of high school counselors in Virginia and Alabama was proportionate among the two states. There is sufficient evidence to say that the distribution of high school counselors in Virginia is different from the distribution of high school counselors in Alabama in the selected areas of leadership, school improvement, and collaboration with the exception of consultation with parents, teachers, and administrators in which there was not a significant difference. In fact, in each case where the null hypothesis was rejected, the group of school counselors identified more strongly (very important or very accurate) with the statements than did the counselors in Virginia who responded to this survey.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative results are discussed in response to the second research question. The section begins with a summary of the process, participant descriptions, common descriptive characteristics, themes, and a summary of the findings.

High School Counselor Roles and Responsibilities

To further examine participant roles and responsibilities, qualitative data were collected via individual semi-structured interviews with five high school counselors from

five of the 38 high schools. Qualitative analysis addresses the second research question: “How do high school counselors perceive the impact of their roles and responsibilities on student engagement and outcomes, i.e., absenteeism, dropouts, and graduation and completion?” Interview questions addressed participant perceptions of their roles and responsibilities within their high school and the impact they have on student engagement. Raw interview data were transcribed, reviewed, and organized into categories based on actual language and terms used by participants. Five connecting themes were derived from the categories: life ready, connectedness, data-driven decision-making, strengthening understanding, and access and availability. A detailed discussion of the interconnecting themes is provided, followed by a summary of the qualitative findings.

Participant Descriptions

Five school counselors working in Virginia high schools identified as having at least one L3 quality indicator rating participated in virtual interviews with me. Interview participants included one male and four females. Four participants were African American and one Caucasian. Participant ages ranged from 25 to 68 years old with three to 13 years of school counseling experience. All participants had worked at their high school for at least one year. Three of five participants were members of ASCA, one of five was a member of the Virginia School Counseling Association, and two of five were not members of any professional organization.

Common Descriptive Characteristics

Three of five of the interview participants are high school counselors in schools in large schools with student enrollment above 1,000. Likewise, three of five schools have a low socioeconomic status student population, a high minority population, and an

exceptional children population of 25% or above. Two high school counselors have a student caseload over the ASCA recommended 250:1 ratio.

All high school counselors reported individual and/or large group counseling and sessions as one of their counseling duties. Non-counseling duties reported by three of the five counselors included hall duty and attendance. In addition, two of the five counselors reported either lunch duty, 504 case management, or SAT/PSAT test coordinator as non-counseling duties. Four of five high school counselors reported that they are responsible for some form of data entry and/or registrar tasks or responsibilities. Finally, one school counselor reported being responsible for completing the master schedule for the school, attendance monitoring, and scheduling truancy meetings with parents.

Qualitative Themes

The data analysis revealed five categories: post-graduation, student support, student needs, school counselor role, and resources. Five themes emerged from the categories presented in Table 9.

Table 9*Categories and Connecting Themes*

Category	Theme	Theme description
Post-graduation	Life ready	Career and social-emotional success beyond high school.
Student support	Connectedness	Relationships with students that strengthen and empower them.
Student needs	Data-driven decision-making	Respond to student needs based on data, not emotion.
School counselor role	Strengthening understanding	Increase awareness of the school counseling profession by viewing school counselors as leaders.
Resources	Access and availability	The general need for access to “more options for students” (mental health services, career/technical programs).

Life Ready. Each interview participant discussed in some aspect their role in assisting or preparing students for life beyond high school, whether it included postsecondary planning, building strong social-emotional skills, educating and empowering families to provide basic needs to ensure high school completion, or simply prioritizing education as a means to ensuring lifelong success. Participant B stated that the overall goal of their school is for students to “graduate life ready: enrolled, enlisted, or employed.” In addition to this overarching goal, Participant B shared that they “really care about how [students] graduate and what they do after they graduate” desiring to “help students reach their full potential.” When describing student success, Participant B stated that “seeing them being successful at what their definition is of being successful” was rewarding to them. The notion that success was not determined by whether or not students attended a 4-year college/university was common among all of the high school

counselors who were interviewed. Participant C shared that one of their roles as a school counselor is to help students “have success where they’ve never had it before.” The shared mindset of the interviewed participants in regard to their students was that of attaining success by graduating from high school life ready. The interrelated theme among all the high school counselors was that upon graduation, the opportunities and possibilities are endless if students are empowered and prepared academically, socially, and emotionally.

Connectedness. Building a community of support for students was another common theme among the interviewed participants. Creating a sense of connectedness for students ultimately “helps students to be academically successful.” Participant A explained that they really get to know their freshmen by “making sure that they understand that we are connected, and we are together all 4 years.” Participant E shared a similar response, adding that connecting with their students early on created impressionable relationships that lasted well through graduation from high school and continued to college and beyond. Participant E added that for many of their students, they were a confidant, voice of reason, coach, cheerleader, and so much more, which proved to be beneficial to those who did not receive the support elsewhere. Participant C also makes those connections for their students by finding “the necessary support if they don’t have it in their home environment.” Participant C stated that they often help students identify clubs, groups, and/or courses that can enhance them or increase their interest in education. The common goal for each of the high school counselors is to provide support to encourage and promote academic success. In regard to social-emotional well-being, students endure difficult situations, and many will have traumatic experiences; however,

Participant A said it best: “Your answer to difficult situations with students cannot be that you bear the burden, you have to strengthen the child.” School counselors use collaboration to strengthen children by building a community of support specifically for them. Participant A described that their role and frame of work is “to give kids every opportunity and every excuse and additional responsibility, structure, and support to engage despite how difficult time has been.” The implication is that students who feel connected and have a sense of belonging are more likely to be socially and emotionally stable, thus producing academically successful youth.

Data-Driven Decision-Making. “Decisions made in the absence of data are based on emotion.” This quote shared by Participant A is the essence of this interrelated theme. Each interview participant discussed varying scenarios in which they respond or have responded to student needs based on data. Participant D described how they develop small groups for students based on student needs assessment data. Likewise, Participant E facilitates support groups for students identified through attendance and truancy reporting. Participant C developed a Freshman Academy at their high school a few years ago after discovering that 16 freshmen on their caseload had never passed a core course or an end-of-course test in middle school. Participant C was appalled and complained for 2 years because they were partially responsible for ensuring that the students graduated from high school in 4 years. Based on data that they continuously provided to their principal and other stakeholders, they were allowed to develop and lead the Freshman Academy. Participant C selected English, math, and science teachers who were responsible for teaching 20 low-performing rising ninth-grade students in year-long classes along with an elective course and physical education. Many of the students were

reading well below grade level. Fortunately, the first year of the Freshman Academy was a success, and Participant C was permitted to increase student enrollment to 40 students the second year. The program has been a success for the past 6 years with a 100% passing rate on the Algebra 1 end-of-course test each year. This synopsis is a prime example of the importance and valuable use of data-driven decision-making as it relates to student success.

Strengthening Understanding. A repetitive challenge for all the interviewed participants was the misperception of the school counselor role. Participant A stated that they make it clear to their colleagues and student families that they are a “school counselor,” and their primary responsibility is to help children succeed academically, while their counseling is centered on their social-emotional and interpersonal skills. Participant E reported concerns about still being referred to as a “guidance counselor,” despite their efforts to educate people about the ASCA declared name change to school counselor many years ago. Participant B is building stronger relationships with teachers so they understand what school counselors do and that they are not the antiquated guidance counselor of the past. Participant B stated that their goal is to strengthen the understanding of school counseling across the school building. Moreover, they want to help other school counselors see themselves as professional leaders while taking a stronger stance and solidifying themselves in the education world: “We have to continue to show people why we are important and necessary in schools.”

Access and Availability. Although a major goal of the interviewed participants is for their students to be self-sufficient and life-ready individuals, they could not overlook the fact that many of their students lacked necessary resources due to unavailability

within their schools, districts, and/or communities. Participant A mentioned that “it is advantageous for students to keep finding new ways to connect and engage”; however, students are limited in their options if the resources are not accessible or available to them. Two recurring needs that were discussed in four of the five interviews were access to mental health services and educational options for career and technical training. Participant C exclaimed that “we need an educational system that provides for all, but where is the money going to come from? There is inequity in how education is funded.”

Summary of Qualitative Findings

Five high school counselors from five of the 38 high schools with at least one L3 quality indicator rating participated in individual semi-structured virtual interviews. The recorded interviews were approximately 45 minutes long and were later reviewed, transcribed, and emailed to participants for member checking. Common descriptive characteristics were presented. Data analysis revealed five categories extracted from the transcriptions: post-graduation, student support, student needs, school counselor role, and resources. Within those five categories, there were five recurring themes: life ready, connectedness, data-driven decision-making, strengthening understanding, and access and availability. Interview responses were presented to provide clarification of each theme detailing the essence of the interviews.

Triangulation of Results

Triangulation of the key quantitative findings and qualitative themes are provided in this section. There was significant agreement among participants between both phases of data collection in terms of priorities, perceptions, roles, and responsibilities. Table 10 outlines quantitative items with response rates above 60% and the associated qualitative

responses captured during participant interviews. The category and theme in which these responses are interconnected are also listed.

Table 10

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Triangulation

Quantitative result	Qualitative result	Category/theme
Advocate changing policies and practices that can negatively impact student success.	Participants discussed concerns regarding systemic issues that impede student success.	Student needs/ data-driven decision-making
Counsel students individually about social/emotional issues.	Participants identified social/emotional counseling as a high priority and responsibility.	Student support/ connectedness
Improve student access to academic support services.	Participants discussed concerns related to lack of resources.	Resources/access and availability
Evaluate the school counseling program's effort to increase academic performance.	Participants described the use of data-informed decision-making practices and efforts.	Student needs/ data-driven decision-making
Develop strategies to change policies and practices that negatively impact student success.	Participants described the use of data-informed decision-making practices and efforts.	Student needs/ data-driven decision-making
Monitor student academic performance.	Participants described their role/responsibility in ensuring student academic success.	School counselor role/strengthening understanding
Refer students to community professionals for mental health problems.	Participants discussed concerns related to assisting students with mental health issues.	Resources/access and availability
High school counselors regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators.	Participants described their role/responsibility with ensuring students have a supportive community.	Student support/ connectedness
Teachers and counselors work together to identify students who are not performing to their best level.	Participants described their collaboration efforts to ensure student success.	Student support/ connectedness

Summary of Findings

Quantitative survey results were presented first noting key findings followed by qualitative themes derived from participant interviews. The research questions that have guided this research study are reintroduced as a reference for presenting a final summary of the findings.

Research Question 1

What are the experiences of high school counselors who work in low-performing schools? Quantitative results revealed that the Virginia high school counselors who participated in this study prioritize student academic performance by advocating and developing strategies to change policies and practices, improving access to academic support services, evaluating the school counseling program to increase academic performance, and monitoring student academic performance. Participants regularly consult with parents, teachers, and administrators in addition to collaborating with teachers to identify students who are not performing at their best. Nearly 97% of the participating high school counselors prioritize individual counseling for students struggling with social/emotional issues. Making referrals to community professionals for mental health services was also highly reported. In view of that, the social/emotional wellness of students is a top priority for participants. Areas in which participants did not rate highly as a priority included assisting teachers with classroom management, providing professional development, and participating in key decision-making teams. Further, participant ratings were on the significantly lower end for items in which school counselors believed they are viewed as leaders.

Research Question 2

How do high school counselors perceive the impact of their roles and responsibilities on student engagement and outcomes, i.e., absenteeism, dropouts, and graduation and completion? Participant responses varied but each described and discussed their roles and responsibilities which could be categorized in five areas: post-graduation, student support, student needs, school counselor role, and resources. Within those five categories, five recurring themes were present in all interviews: life ready, connectedness, data-driven decision-making, strengthening understanding, and access and availability. Each participant discussed their role in helping students reach their full potential by acknowledging academic and support deficits, addressing social/emotional issues, and raising awareness about the school counseling profession. The overall participant perception regarding their impact is that of a support system for their students, a support system that ensures students are prepared for life beyond high school. Through relationship building and collaboration, interview participants believe they are making a positive impact on the lives of their students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This convergent parallel mixed methods study set out to illuminate the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors in low-performing schools. Further, the study explored the role of high school counselors and their impact on student engagement and outcomes (i.e., chronic absenteeism, dropout rate, and graduation and completion). Although an extensive review of the literature revealed a number of studies involving school counselors, research specifically targeting high school counselor perceptions of working in low-performing high schools and the impact their roles and responsibilities have on student engagement was lacking. There has not been a significant focus on the vital school counselors' role in improving student outcomes (Hines et al., 2017). This study contributes a grounded theory methodology to school counseling literature that is beneficial to policymakers, stakeholders, administrators, and counselors. School counselors may reference research findings during discussions with school administrators to clarify role expectations and identify appropriate school counseling services intended to meet student needs. School counseling directors and coordinators can use the findings to initiate discussions with superintendents and school board members about the perceptions of high school counselors regarding their roles. Last but not least, recent school counselor graduates may consider the findings to enhance their understanding of the professional school counseling role as they seek employment. This chapter summarizes and concludes the study to include a discussion of the findings with comparisons to previous research and literature, implications for practice, implications for theory, implications for future research, and a section covering limitations of the study.

Discussion of Findings

A chi-square goodness of fit test was used to determine whether or not there was a significance in the distribution among Virginia and Alabama school counselor proportions in the targeted areas of leadership, collaboration, and school improvement. The analysis determined that the Virginia high school counselor distribution of participants who completed selected items of an adapted version of the ASCNPD survey in this study differed from the high school counselor distribution of participants who completed the survey in an Alabama study in the areas of leadership and school improvement. Two of three items related to collaboration also revealed a significant difference in the school counselor distribution among the two states, but there was not a significant difference in the proportion of school counselors reporting that they regularly consult with parents, teachers, and administration. Both studies had similar results in regard to school counselor priorities and perceptions. Birdsong (2020) reported that participants described an emphasis on school improvement and student social/emotional needs as priorities which is consistent with the findings of this study. In addition, Alabama participants described their perceptions of the comprehensive school counseling program meeting all students' holistic needs through differentiated program delivery and services (Birdsong, 2020). Quantitative results of this study revealed that the Virginia high school counselors who participated in this study prioritize student academic performance by advocating and developing strategies to change policies and practices, improving access to academic support services, evaluating the school counseling program to increase academic performance, and monitoring student academic performance. Likewise, the greater majority of participating Virginia high school counselors prioritize

social/emotional needs and counseling. This finding is also consistent with Dahir (2001), who noted that school counselors most valued the ASCA domain of social/emotional development.

Participants regularly consult with parents, teachers, and administrators in addition to collaborating with teachers to identify students who are not performing at their best. Making referrals to community professionals for mental health services was also highly reported. In alignment with Birdsong (2020), Alabama participants perceived collaboration, consultation, and counseling as essential aspects of program implementation. This finding is also aligned with Zalaquett (2005), who discovered principals most valued the counselor roles of collaboration, consultation, and counseling.

Consistent with Alabama participants, areas in which participants did not rate highly as a priority included assisting teachers with classroom management and providing professional development. Both items align with the ASCA National Model collaboration component as a professional standard for school counselors. Birdsong (2020) noted that Alabama participants may have viewed their role in collaboration with teachers as being more focused on the student rather than the classroom management technique as a possible explanation for the low overall mean. Further, Alabama responses were fairly mixed with a high standard deviation of 1.29. Nonetheless, current study participants were cut and dry with 10% (n=52) reporting “help teachers improve classroom management skills” as “very important” and 76.67% (n=52) on the opposite end reporting the item as “somewhat important.” These ratings indicate plausible cause that the participants are not frequently consulting with teachers to provide strategies that address student behavior in the classroom. The resistance to becoming more visible in the

counseling role can be contributed to the comfort level in prioritizing traditional counseling services, thus resulting in the lack of advancement in school counseling practices and its integration in the educational system (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Burnham, Dahir, & Stone, 2008). Through in-service training, school counselors can create culturally sensitive schools that promote academic success for all students (Wingfield et al., 2010).

Participant ratings were on the significantly lower end for “very accurate” items in which 16.67% (n=52) of school counselors believe they are viewed as leaders and 20% (n=52) participate on leadership teams. These findings are contrary to those of Alabama participants wherein 86.67% of school counselors reported that they are viewed as leaders and that they are part of leadership teams; however, it is questionable as to how many of the 86.67% of school counselors were “active” participants on the leadership teams as opposed to just being listed as a member. School-based leadership teams provide opportunities for school counselors to exhibit their leadership capabilities while implementing the use of data-informed decision-making to ascertain effective interventions and evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020; Young et al., 2013). Henceforth, school counselors should actively participate on school leadership teams in collaboration with teachers and administrators to identify student needs that may be addressed by implementing evidence-based interventions (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020). Interventions should be evaluated to identify progress toward outcomes deemed beneficial to student growth and success (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020).

Transitioning to qualitative results, five themes were revealed during participant

interviews. Each participant described or discussed varying scenarios related to ensuring that students are life-ready upon graduation from high school and feel a sense of connectedness through support, their needs are met through data-driven decision-making, and they have resources that are available and accessible. In addition, participants in this study expressed a need to educate and inform others about the professional school counselor role in an effort to strengthen their understanding of the profession. Three of the themes correlate with three of four themes revealed in Birdsong's (2020) study: collaboration, use of data, and advocacy. One current study participant shared that she views herself as a "community builder," ensuring collaboration and transparency with parents, teachers, and administrators. Another participant discussed how she works with families to educate and empower them to provide basic needs as a means to ensure their students graduate. This practice directly ties with Birdsong's participants stating that their collaboration was essential to identifying student needs, providing services to address needs, and evaluating the impact of those services on student needs.

Next, the use of data was discussed in the previous study in which current participants consistently described the use of data-driven decision-making to address student needs. One participant quoted her administrator, stating, "Decisions made in the absence of data are based on emotion." This statement is a subliminal reminder for her to get to know her students so she would know how to respond to their needs based on data and not out of emotion. Another participant described in great detail his process for developing and persuading stakeholders to implement a Freshman Academy to address issues with low-performing freshmen who were years below grade level. Correspondingly, Alabama participants described implementing data-driven programs,

which consisted of collecting and analyzing student outcome data, program data, and intervention-level data (Birdsong, 2020). Further, ASCA (2019b) stated data-informed decision-making is an integral component of a school counseling program and the school's academic mission in order to have a meaningful impact on overall student achievement, attendance, and discipline.

Finally, advocacy in various forms was mutually discussed. In the current study, participants discussed advocacy for their students in some detail especially in regard to availability and accessibility to resources. These discussions were similar to Birdsong's (2020) participants who discussed how they work to identify and remove barriers affecting student opportunities and potential success; however, the major theme in this study in regard to advocacy was more centered on increasing awareness about the school counselor role in the academic setting. One participant stated, "the challenge is that people don't have a clear understanding of what the school counseling role is." ASCA (2019b) defined the role of a school counselor as a professional position in which all students' academic, personal/social, and career development needs are addressed through the implementation and evaluation of a comprehensive school counseling program that is designed to promote student success. Further, eighty-percent of school counselors' time should be dedicated to serving students either directly or indirectly to include referrals, consultation, and collaboration. Twenty-percent of school counselors' time should be relegated to program planning, management, professional development, and fair share duties (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013). Specifically, the school counselor role involves the development of a core curriculum that includes academic, career, and social/emotional group lessons, individualized advisement and appraisal, and providing responsive

services (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013).

Participants in this study shed light on how they ensure that their colleagues, students, and parents understand their ASCA-defined role as professional school counselors. One participant described her advocacy efforts as taking on a position of school counseling leadership in which she is strengthening the understanding of school counseling across her building. Another participant is dedicated to helping other school counselors see themselves as professional leaders, stating that school counselors must “continue to take a stronger stance and solidify ourselves in the education world.”

Implications for Practice

The 52 participants in this study sacrificed valuable time to contribute meaningful data in support of their esteemed profession. Their contribution to school counseling research enhances school counseling literature and exemplifies their advocacy and passion for the profession. Based on their contributions, the following implications are provided for active and pursuing professional school counselors, school counseling leadership including administrators and stakeholders, and comprehensive school counseling program advocates.

Professional School Counselors

School counselors are mental health professionals, collaborators, leaders, and advocates working diligently to promote success for all students (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013; Stone & Dahir, 2006). This study revealed that Virginia high school counselors in low-performing schools are in fact working towards implementation of comprehensive counseling programs that promote overall achievement; however, there were some deficits professional school counselors should take into consideration as they move

forward in professional growth.

First, quantitative results revealed that Virginia high school counselors in low-performing schools perceive that they are not viewed as leaders. This perception was clarified in participant interviews in which it was noted that school counselors recognize the disparities in how they are viewed and their role in the school setting. School counselors may face obstacles when assuming leadership roles due to lack of knowledge pertaining to the ASCA National Model or misperceptions regarding the school counseling role (Wingfield et al., 2010). Accordingly, it is imperative that school counselors educate and inform stakeholders of their leadership potential. It is also important to acknowledge that school counselors may not be able to cultivate working relationships with all stakeholders (Wingfield et al., 2010) in order to accurately inform them of their leadership role as professional school counselors. Some school leaders may have reservations about associating with or acknowledging school counselors as leaders. Nevertheless, school counselors should utilize interpersonal skills to make connections within the school building and develop rapport with various stakeholders in the school system and community (Wingfield et al., 2010). Professional school counselors must remain confident in their position and affirm their leadership role, never taking for granted the significance and importance of the work they do for their students.

Second, survey results revealed that a large majority of Virginia high school counselors in low-performing schools do not provide professional development in their schools to educate, inform, and increase awareness regarding the role of school counselors. Participant interviews confirmed survey responses, wherein one of five school counselors stated that she facilitates professional development in her school.

Although the remaining school counselors stated that they advocate, educate, and inform others to strengthen understanding on individual and case-by-case situations, they do not conduct schoolwide professional development on ASCA National Model elements and the role of school counselors in the academic setting. As school counselors are uniquely positioned to support student skills, address barriers to learning, and support school strategic priorities (Savitz-Romer, 2019), it is within their capability to provide professional development opportunities that enhance and promote academic success. Further, Waalkes et al. (2019) recommended that school counselors engage in professional advocacy to increase program implementation and support. Facilitating professional development in the school setting is a reputable avenue for school counselors to share their mission, program goals, counseling role, and responsibilities in addition to strategies to enhance student academic achievement and classroom management skills, which is the final topic for consideration.

Virginia high school counselor participants in low-performing schools reported that they do not assist teachers with classroom management skills; however, helping teachers with classroom management skills aligns with the ASCA component of collaboration, thus it is an essential responsibility of school counselors who may be able to provide teachers with pertinent information and techniques that can be used to assist individual students in the classroom setting. School counselors should keep in mind that “assisting teachers with classroom management” does not specifically mean managing disruptive behaviors of an unruly classroom, but rather collaborating with teachers to make data-informed decisions regarding student needs in order to provide techniques and strategies to address those needs. This is especially important for schools with a low

socioeconomic population and/or exceptional children population. School counselors may use their skills to offer unconventional perspectives for students of low-income families to assist teachers with classroom management and creating a more conducive environment for learning (Wingfield et al., 2010). Last but not least, school counselors understand potential strengths and resources for low-income families and children with disabilities which is valuable information for identifying feasible solutions to issues in the classroom.

School Counseling Leadership

The school counselors' primary objective is to be a school leader (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020, para. 1; ASCA, 2019b).

When school counselors are recognized as leaders and experts of interpreting the social context of achievement to colleagues, it becomes much easier for them to advocate for marginalized students, voice their professional opinion in formal meetings, and propose and implement germane interventions for students in need. (Wingfield et al., 2010, p. 129)

To stakeholders, administrators, and school leaders responsible for school counselor supervision, it is imperative that you recognize your school counselors as leaders in the field of education and your schools and furthermore hold them accountable for their school counseling responsibilities while allowing them time to effectively operate a comprehensive school counseling program based on the ASCA National Model and Standards. With that being said, 80% of school counselors' time must be devoted to providing direct and indirect services to students or indirectly in collaboration with parents, teachers, administrators, and any other stakeholders. The remaining 20% of their

time should be allotted to program management and school support activities. Fair-share duties are acceptable within reason but should not consume more than 20% of a school counselor's time consistently, as the non-counseling duties detrimentally interfere with the great work and time that professional school counselors need to devote to their students and the comprehensive school counseling program to ensure the overall success of the school. Finally, administrators and stakeholders are encouraged to join school counselors in advocating for the profession and the need for professional development opportunities specifically designed for school counselors. School administrators may discuss school counselor roles and responsibilities with other school leaders and stakeholders to provide clarity about how to effectively utilize a school counselor's time and expertise to heighten student success (Nyan, 2017).

Comprehensive School Counseling Program Advocates

School counselors have a responsibility to be leaders and advocates (Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020). Advocacy is an integral part of the school counselor's role, according to the ASCA National Model (Field & Baker, 2004; Wood, 2012). For instance,

the advocacy efforts of school counselors are aimed at (a) eliminating barriers impeding student development, (b) creating opportunities to learn for all students, (c) ensuring access to a quality school curriculum, (d) collaborating with others within and outside the school to help students meet their needs, and (e) promoting positive systemic change in schools. (ASCA, 2019b, para. 3)

Advocating for a comprehensive school counseling program involves informing educational stakeholders about the program and its effect on overall school performance. When advocating for the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program,

it is important to consider the aforementioned advocacy efforts, stakeholder wants and needs, and the support and services school counselors can provide (Hall, 2017).

The ASCA Position Statement is also beneficial when advocating as it provides a rationale for the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs which are a vital component of a school's mission. School counseling programs are based on ASCA National Standards and student needs identified through the collection of school data. School counseling programs are systematically delivered to all students by licensed professional school counselors. Licensed professional school counselors respect diversity and individuality, thus they are skilled in responding to societal issues in a sensitive and responsive manner. In addition, school counseling programs adhere to a mindsets and behaviors curriculum that is developmentally and culturally appropriate for all students' postsecondary needs to minimize achievement gaps (ASCA, 2017). The overarching goal of a school counseling program is to improve student academic achievement, discipline, and attendance. Successful school counseling programs construct a positive culture that will impact student achievement through collaborative relationships between school counselors, parents/guardians, community members, and education stakeholders (ASCA, 2017). Both brick-and-mortar and virtual school counseling programs warrant equitable access to a rigorous curriculum and opportunities for all students to fully engage in the educational process (ASCA, 2017).

Implications for Theory

The theoretical context of this study is based on the principles of ecological theory. The following discussion examines the results of the study within the theoretical framework of ecology. The implications for theory also include discussions relevant to previous research and related literature.

Ecological Theory

With the focus of this study emphasizing the impact of high school counselors on student engagement and outcomes, it is equally important that we understand the impact that environmental factors have on the well-being, development, and academic achievement of students. As noted during participant interviews for this study, each of the high school counselors described situations in which environmental factors have affected student achievement, particularly in school settings of low socioeconomic status and more recently students who have been affected by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), whether directly or indirectly. In an attempt to understand the environmental effects on student achievement, we can draw from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory which interprets child development as a multifaceted classification of relationships affected by environment, culture, values, and customs (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1994) theory suggests that our environment is divided into five systems referred to as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is considered the most influential ecological system because it is the most impressionable environment (home and school) in a child's life. For purposes of this study, the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem are levels of focus due to their implications for educational practice.

The microsystem level contains people and places that have direct contact with a child including school peers, teachers, and school counselors. Microsystem relationships can be inclined by other people in a child's environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). The exchanges within the microsystem personal and typically crucial for nurturing the child's development (Guy-Evans, 2020), hence the importance of a support system that provides students with a sense of connectedness in the school setting. School connectedness is a students' belief that school faculty and staff are genuinely concerned about them and care about their learning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). More importantly, there is a correlation between school connectedness and student outcomes (Lemkin et al., 2018). The mesosystem incorporates interactions within the microsystem. This may include interactions between a student's parents and school counselor or between school peers and siblings. According to the ecological systems theory, if a student's parents and school counselor have a purposeful relationship, the relationship may have a positive effect on the student's academic achievement. High school counselor participants in this study reported that they regularly consult and collaborate with parents in an effort to bridge the gap between school and home with hopes of ensuring academic achievement. Finally, the macrosystem determines the effects of cultural elements on development, such as ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, demographic location, and religious beliefs. It is important to note that more than half of the 38 low-performing schools identified in this study have a high population of low socioeconomic students and/or a high minority population. Culture influences perceptions and beliefs about the events that take place in a child's life (Guy-Evans, 2020). A school counselor's knowledge of such cultural elements enables them to identify and connect students with

beneficial resources, in addition to providing teachers with techniques and strategies that may assist students in the classroom. This ecological perspective is especially useful to the participants in this study who noted that they do not assist teachers with classroom management as it sheds light on a new way of thinking.

Lippard et al. (2018) found that teacher-student relationships were significantly related to student academic achievement and classroom behavior, indicating that teacher-student relationships are vital for development. Consequently, school counselor-student relationships are equally related to student engagement and outcome based on the results of this study by the theory. School counselor interviews corroborated survey results revealing that high school counselors prioritize the social/emotional needs of their students through individual counseling in which meaningful relationships are established to maintain trust and acceptance. Furthermore, the high school counselors in this study reported the use of consultation, collaboration, and advocacy in which purposeful relationships were formed within a mesosystem to identify student needs and provide the necessary support for academic achievement.

School counselors transition from the microlevel to the mesolevel when working with students individually and in large groups, and to the macrolevel when collaborating with teachers, administrators, and/or community stakeholders. This process proved to be true as participants in the study described a typical day in their high schools. A beneficial step toward school counseling transformation would be to embrace and apply an ecological perspective as a guide for school counselors and their role in education (McMahon et al., 2014). Ecological thought provides a different perspective for creating systemic change, which is limited in school counseling literature (McMahon et al., 2014).

Consequently, McMahon et al. (2014) proposed that school counselors adopt an ecological perspective to promote student success as effective leaders in education. An ecological perspective can make the school counselor role more intentional and formal considering school counselors work with various stakeholders in multiple capacities and are knowledgeable about overall school functions (McMahon et al., 2014). School counselors with a desire to generate healthy, balanced, and well-functioning environments strive to incorporate theory and practice (Brown, 2016). Accordingly, high school counselors who adopt an ecological approach to school counseling can ensure that they are aligned with school improvement plans and the school mission while promoting systemic change for the academic achievement of all students.

Implications for Future Research

This study made an informative contribution to school counseling literature by detailing high school counselor perceptions regarding their impact on student engagement and outcomes in low-performing schools in Virginia. The variables in this study may be replicated for future research in other states to compare the findings. Additionally, there is currently limited research regarding ecological school counseling. Although professional school counseling is evolving towards an ecological methodology, it has not been utilized as a purposeful and methodical approach to enlighten the range of the professional school counselors' work (McMahon et al., 2014). Accordingly, research considerations may include an exploration of school counselors' strategies, techniques, and methods for working with underperforming students due to adverse environmental factors utilizing an ecological perspective. An important factor of recent concern is the impact of the novel coronavirus on student academic performance. Future research may

also seek to identify best practices for meeting the social/emotional needs of students impacted by environmental conditions considering school counselors in the present study expressed frustration related to the need for more options, resources, and mental health support.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study are presented as considerations for future research that were largely outside the control of the researcher. First, this study targeted high school counselors in Virginia in which study results may vary in other states and countries. Likewise, measures of school success may also vary among states, whereas quality indicators and ratings may differ from those in Virginia. Finally, this study focused on low-performing high schools while omitting the perceptions of high school counselors in mid- to high achieving high schools.

Conclusion

The industrialized education model has proven to be outdated with its lack of advancement, alliance, and collective leadership (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b.). This industrial model that the U.S. Department of Education describes is that of a linear process as opposed to a cyclical process that values efficiency versus equality and uniformity versus uniqueness in an attempt to produce standardized “successful students.” Unfortunately, this concept disregards a number of students who do not fit the industrial model’s view of a successful student. The high school counselor participants in this study reportedly recognize the value and importance of their position and are in fact performing their counseling duties to the best of their ability to ensure their students are life-ready. Nonetheless, their schools are rated below state-mandated standards based on

an industrial model of student success. School systems guided by the belief that education is systematic and stationary will not yield ideal graduates that are prepared to meet the technological and diverse multicultural needs of the 21st century (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b.). Without knowledge of this specific quote, several interviewed high school counselors in this study discussed in detail surprisingly similar sentiments. Their belief that all students are unique and culturally diverse with varying ideas of what success is due to their inherent environmental factors suggests that the school counselors have developed an ecological perspective as culturally responsive counselors. The professional school counseling evolution emphasizes the extreme importance of understanding students within their environment. The Education Trust (2009) stated that the school counseling profession emphasizes the relationship between students and the school environment to diminish environmental effects and barriers that hinder academic performance.

Currently, professional school counselors are aware of their impact on student engagement and outcome; however, they are also aware of the areas in which the educational system is lacking, including the availability and access to resources, mental health supports, and equitable funding. There is also the undeniable concern related to adverse environmental factors that continually hinder and impact individual student achievement. Consequently, school counselors must not feel as if their work is in vain due to measures of success beyond their control. Moving forward, school counselors are urged to continue advocating for the school counseling profession and their leadership role in their schools. The use of consultation and collaboration, building/improving the administrator-school counselor relationship, and making data-informed decisions are

equally important. Most importantly, professional school counselors must remain hopeful and encouraged by even the smallest of victories and student accomplishments.

Professional school counselors who are confident in their abilities and engaged in their professional roles are valuable to their students, their schools, and their communities.

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Appendix A

Assessment of School Counselor Needs for Professional Development Survey

Assessment of School Counselor Needs for Professional Development Survey

School Counseling Priorities

How important are each of the following activities or tasks for school counselors in the high school setting?

Not at all important – Somewhat important – Important – Very Important – Extremely Important

1. Advocate changing policies and practices that can negatively impact student success.
2. Help teachers improve classroom management skills.
3. Counsel students individually about social/emotional issues.
4. Improve student access to academic support services.
5. Evaluate the school counseling program's effort to raise academic performance.
6. Develop strategies or advocate to change policies and practices that negatively impact student success.
7. Use data to identify specific areas of school improvement.
8. Work with administrators and teachers on school improvement issues.
9. Reduce social/institutional barriers that keep students from achieving their potential.
10. Develop and implement prevention programs.
11. Serve on school/district committees.
12. Participate in an academic department or grade-level meetings.
13. Monitor student academic performance.
14. Work with students in small groups on social/emotional issues.
15. Deliver classroom lessons on a variety of grade-level-appropriate topics.
16. Counsel students who have behavioral problems in classes.
17. Assist teachers with improving classroom management.
18. Refer students to community professionals for mental health problems.

School Setting Perceptions

Please indicate the extent to which, in your observations and experiences in the high school setting, each of the following statements is accurate.

Not at all accurate – A little accurate – Accurate – Somewhat accurate – Very accurate

1. High school counselors regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators.
2. Teachers and counselors work together to identify students who are not performing to their best level.
3. School counselors work with faculty and administration to improve the school climate.
4. High school counselors are viewed as school leaders.
5. School counselors are part of key decision-making teams.
6. Administrators work with school counselors to increase student academic performance.

7. School counselors provide leadership to promote every student's right to quality education.
8. Teachers and high school counselors work together to improve student achievement.
9. School counselors use school data to assess student performance and develop necessary services.
10. I have established strong collaborative relationships with local community organizations and agencies.
11. School counselors reduce social/institutional barriers that keep students from achieving success.
12. School counselors are increasing the participation of underrepresented students in higher-level academics such as honors, IB, and AP classes.
13. Teachers regularly send students to the school counselor to deal with personal problems.
14. School counselors provide group counseling based on identified student needs.
15. Provide professional development activities to teachers.
16. Use grades to identify under-performing students.

Personal-Social Development

In the high school setting, how often do school counselors work with students to address the following?

Never – Rarely – Sometimes – Frequently – Almost daily

1. Personal/social issues.
2. Diversity issues.
3. Managing emotions (stress, anger, coping, etc.).
4. School counselors counsel students individually about personal/social issues.
5. Time and task organizational skills.
6. Strengthening interpersonal communication skills.
7. Preventing problems (e.g., alcohol, teen pregnancy, truancy, dropout, etc.).
8. Decision-making skills.
9. School discipline incidents.
10. Serious mental health problems (depression, addiction, etc.).

CaDevelopmentopment

In the high school setting, how often do school counselors work with students to address the following?

Never – Rarely – Sometimes – Frequently – Almost daily

1. Help students identify their future educational and career options.
2. Work with students individually or in groups on career planning activities.
3. Developing educational and career plans.
4. College admissions strategies.
5. Educational program planning.

Academic Development

In the high school setting, how often do school counselors work with students to address the following?

Never – Rarely – Sometimes – Frequently – Almost daily

1. Study skills (note-taking, outlining, reading).
2. Test-taking strategies.
3. Improving grades/personal problems that affect grades.

Program Management

In the high school setting, how often do school counselors work with students to address the following?

Never – Rarely – Sometimes – Frequently – Almost daily

1. School counselors deliver guidance programs in classes.
2. School counselors use the national standards for school counseling programs to deliver specific student competencies in academic, career, and personal-social development.
3. School counselors monitor and evaluate the impact of the school counseling program on student achievement and success.

Appendix B
Consent Form

Gardner-Webb University Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent Form for Online Survey

Title of Research Study

High School Counselors in Low-Performing Schools and their Perceived Impact on
Student Engagement and Outcomes

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to 1) illuminate the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors in low-performing schools, and 2) explore the role(s) of high school counselors and their impact on student engagement and outcomes (i.e., student attendance, dropout rate, and graduation and completion). As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete a survey with an approximate completion time of 20 minutes. In addition, you will have the option to participate in a virtual interview with me to share your experiences as a high school counselor. It is anticipated that the interview will require about 45 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty.

Your survey data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be linked to the information you provide. Your interview responses will be kept confidential. A pseudonym will be used to replace your name, school, and district. Interviews and transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected hard drive. I will conduct virtual interviews in the privacy of my office while you can choose the location of your preference.

There are no foreseeable conflicts of interest at this time; however, you will be notified immediately if any conflicts should arise. There are no anticipated risks in this study. You will receive no payment for participating in the study. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by exiting the survey. Data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

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If you are not 18 years of age or older or you do not consent to participate, please do not proceed. Clicking the link below to continue to the Qualtrics website indicates your consent to participate in the study.

Appendix C
Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Complete this questionnaire to provide the researcher with background information that is pertinent to the study. All information will remain confidential and you will remain confidential. Your reflections will not be shared with your current school district or school administrators.

*** Required**

Age *

Your answer

Race/Ethnicity: Check all that apply *

Alaska Native

American Indian

Asian

Black/African American

Native Hawaiian

Other Pacific Islander

White/Caucasian

Hispanic or Latino: Check in addition to your identified race if you are of Hispanic origin.

Prefer not to say

Gender *

Choose

Professional Memberships and Certifications *

American Counseling Association (ACA)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA)

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

National Board Certified (NBC)

Virginia School Counselor Association (VSCA)

Other

None

How long have you served specifically as a High School Counselor? *

Your answer

What is the name of your current school district? *

Your answer

How long have you been employed in your current district? *

Your answer

What is the name of your current high school? *

Your answer

How long have you been a High School Counselor at your current school? *

Your answer

What is the approximate number of faculty at your high school? *

Your answer

What is the approximate number of students at your high school? *

Your answer

How many students are on your caseload? *

Your answer

What is the socioeconomic makeup of your school? (median family income; percent of parents with a B.S. or higher degree; poverty rate; unemployment rate; SNAP eligibility rate; single-parent households) *

Low

Average

High

What is the student minority makeup of your school? (Minority students include students who are Black/African American, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and of Two or more races) *

Low Population

Average Population

High Population

What is the approximate percentage of students with special needs? *

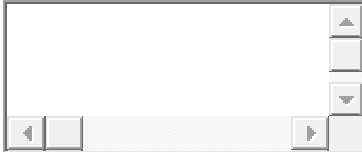
Your answer

Who assigns your job duties and/or responsibilities at your school? *

Choose

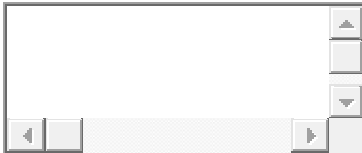
List all administrative "non-counseling duties" you are assigned: *

Your answer



List all "counseling" duties, tasks, and services: *

Your answer



Appendix D
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Date:

Time of interview:

Participant:

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this interview. Please provide responses related to experiences and observations working in your high school setting. I will ask the eight broad, open-ended questions that were shared with you. If at any point you are unsure of the question, please let me know and I will do my best to explain the prompt in more detail. Also, if you prefer not to answer a question or would like to stop the interview, please let me know. You will not be penalized for discontinuing the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Describe your experience as a high school counselor in your school including the services you provide for students, teachers, administrators, and parents.
2. What is your perception of the impact your role and current responsibilities have on student engagement?
3. What expectations do you have for your role as a high school counselor in your school?
4. What are the specific needs of your school counseling program to address gaps in student engagement and performance?
5. Tell me about your reactions, thoughts, and feelings associated with performing non-counseling duties at your school.
6. Describe the challenges (if any) in performing your current duties.
7. Express how your job as a high school counselor influences your sense of professional competency.
8. What aspects of your job do you find fulfilling and what aspects do you think need to change?

Thank you for sharing your experiences and participating in this study. I assure you that your responses will remain confidential and you will not be identified. Once I complete the transcription I will email a copy to you for review. If there is anything that you wish to revise or further explain upon reviewing the transcription you are welcome to do so via email response. This concludes the interview. Do you have any questions before we close the meeting?

Appendix E
Invitation to Participate

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Greetings Fellow School Counselor,

My name is Genevieve Lyons and I am a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, NC. I cordially invite you to participate in my research study exploring the roles and responsibilities of high school counselors and their impact on student engagement and outcome, i.e., absenteeism, dropouts, and graduation and completion. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a Professional High School Counselor working in a Virginia high school. However, your participation is voluntary.

Upon your agreement to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an approximately 20-minute survey via Qualtrics with an option to participate in a virtual interview with me to share your experiences as a high school counselor. The virtual interview will require approximately 45 minutes of your valuable time. Before the interview, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire to answer questions regarding your current status, work experience, school setting, and experience with administrative or non-counseling duties to provide me with baseline data. The virtual interview will take place via Zoom and will consist of 8 questions that will be shared with you before the interview. The interview will solely focus on your experiences as a high school counselor in your current school.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed for reference purposes only. Your personal information will remain confidential and you will not be identified in the study. All files will be saved on a password-protected hard drive to which only I will have access. All materials will remain confidential and will not be released to anyone without your prior written consent. Benefits of participation include an opportunity for you to clarify and process past experiences. Additionally, your experiences and perceptions will be a contribution to the professional literature regarding the school counseling profession.

If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me by responding to this email. Thank you in advance for your contribution to this study and the school counseling profession.

Appendix F
Alabama School Counselor Survey Responses

Item	Somewhat Important/ Somewhat Accurate	Important/ Accurate	Very Important/ Very Accurate
<u>Leadership</u>			
High school counselors are viewed as school leaders.	73.33%	13.33%	13.33%
Provide professional development activities to teachers.	40%	33.33%	13.33%
Help teachers improve classroom management skills.	33.33%	26.67%	20%
<u>Collaboration</u>			
High school counselors regularly consult with parents, teachers, and school administrators.	100%	0%	0%
School counselors work with faculty and administration to improve the school climate.	100%	0%	0%
School counselors are part of key decision-making teams.	86.67%	6.67%	0%
<u>School Improvement</u>			
Administrators work with school counselors to increase student academic performance.	86.67%	13.33%	0%
Use data to identify specific areas of school improvement.	86.67%	6.67%	6.67%
Work with administrators and teachers on school improvement issues.	93.33%	6.67%	0%