

HOW DO HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELLORS PERCEIVE THEIR ROLE?

IT CAN START IN THE PARKING LOT

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## Abstract

This doctoral research was designed to acquire authentic data about the roles of practicing high school counsellors. Through a qualitative collective case study design, twelve practicing high school counsellors were interviewed about their perceptions of their role. Using open and axial coding, data were thematically reported and analyzed and were embedded in three conceptual frameworks: an interpretivist approach, elements of Durkheim's structural functionalism, and principles of grounded theory. The results found that school counsellors perceived tension in ten of eleven thematic topics: advocacy practices, role ambiguity, the overwhelming demands placed upon them, their work as front-line mental health workers, parental communication, the unpredictability of their work day, collaborative practices, their support of school staff, involvement in crisis, and self-care. Counsellors did not perceive tension in supporting students for post-secondary or other academic assistance. Implications for future research were identified which may further reveal the work of high school counsellors, work that may be frequently clandestine to school stakeholders because of the confidential nature of the school counsellor's role.

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The inspiration for the title of this doctoral dissertation, *How Do High School Counsellors Perceive Their Role? It can Start in the Parking Lot*, came from a quote by an experienced counsellor-participant contained in the reporting of this research. “From the minute I drive up to the building,” this participant said, “it can start in the parking lot, and it’s go...” I am grateful for this participant’s eloquent narrative which suggests that the role of high school counsellor has neither geographic nor relational boundaries and thus may contain complexities not known to those outside of the profession. I am likewise grateful to the professional high school counsellors who participated in this research. Their passion and dedication for their role in the lives of students burst forth with every word they imparted to me.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Carol and Leo Ortman, who neglected their own wants to keep me surrounded with books as a child and who read to me. From my birth, they instilled in me a lifelong love of learning. It is also dedicated to my older brother, Frank Ortman, who was, and still is, my first teacher and friend. Finally, I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband Thomas Scott-McGowan who supported my graduate education throughout the first decades of our marriage as I continued to teach and counsel full-time. Through the love and unconditional support of family, I have had a wellspring of blessings.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to the Problem

The current role of high school counsellors in Canada and the United States evolved from societal and educational trends born from industrialization that extend back to the beginning of schools as we know them today (Herr & Erford, 2007; Savickas, 2009; Schmidt, 2008; Van Hesteren, 1971). The Canadian record shows that nineteenth century colonial schools were established to assimilate non-British newcomers and perpetuate the British societal class system on Canadian soil (Johnson, 1968), to educate for simple literacy, and to convert an agricultural populace into an industrial one (Lyons, Randhawa, & Paulson, 1991). At the start of the twentieth century, compulsory schooling was necessary to provide industry with a skilled workforce (Krumboltz & Kolpin, 2003); this form of education became known as *vocational education*, a notion that was taking root in Canada and the United States. Some educators found it necessary to apply themselves to guiding students towards specific competencies; therefore, *vocational guidance*, a complement to vocational education (Gysbers, 2001), was introduced. It is through vocational education and vocational guidance that the position of school counsellor was established (Wingfield, Reese, & West-Olatunji, 2010).

### Early Vocational Programs

It was not only vocational interests, however, that sparked the inception of the school counselling profession. In Canada and the United States, advances brought on by the Industrial Revolution relocated work from the home to the factory (Edson, 1978) and youth were either replaced by machines and factories or they needed specific skills for work, skills that were gained in school through vocational means. Additionally, school

stakeholders were aware of the societal paradigm shift of youth attending school rather than working and this awareness provided additional support for school vocational programs geared towards skilled work. High schools were built at an unprecedented rate and, between 1890 and 1920, youth began to attend school regularly as school replaced work as the “occupation of youth” (Edson, 1978, p. 454). Once schools became established and youth were expected to be in school instead of the factory, placing counsellors in schools came as a result of many who viewed schools as critical in the prevention of social problems brought about by industrialization and growth (Aubrey, 1977; Shertzer & Stone, 1974).

**The mental hygiene and mental testing movements.** In the 1920s, the movements in mental testing and mental hygiene, the practice of identifying “poorly organized or maladjusted personalities” (Kearl, 2014, p. 286), influenced school stakeholders who found it necessary to categorize and place children in either classical or vocational school programs. As the twentieth century progressed, a more clinical or psychological approach (Gysbers, 2001), embraced through the mental testing and mental hygiene movements, provided the impetus for identifying individual mental health problems in children and youth. What resulted was a paradigmatic shift towards sorting and separating students in schools for which trained counsellors were required. The Great Depression and its relation to widespread unemployment saw more youth stay in school longer not only because jobs were scarce but because they needed better skills to obtain the available jobs. As a result, more school counsellors were needed (Super, 1955) and the profession grew.

Paisley and McMahon (2001) observed that, although the school counselling profession had its roots in youth vocational and moral growth, throughout the decades of the twentieth century the profession expanded to include areas influenced by “the social, political, economic, and psychological issues facing schools, communities, families, children, and adolescents” (p. 106). The role of high school counsellors has evolved to respond to these external influences while often carrying out administrative, disciplinary, supervisory, and clerical roles decreed by school-specific policies, procedures, practices, staff, and administration.

### **School Counselling: A Multifaceted Role**

Now, in the early twenty-first century, the role of high school counsellor varies by jurisdiction and practice and is often externally regulated by others such as school division and school administrators (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Erford, House, & Martin, 2007; House & Martin, 1998). Consistent with previous trends, school counsellors are frequently seen as a supporter of the teaching programs within the school rather than a supporter of individual student success (House & Martin, 1998). The extensive and confidential nature of the counsellor role may be discrepant and ambiguous and may even spark debate (Paisley & McMahon, 2001) among school personnel.

The ambiguous role of school counsellor is well-established in the academic literature. Burnham and Jackson (2000) claimed the school counsellor role is “problematic in definition, interpretation, and implementation” (p. 41). Hatch and Chen-Hayes (2008) stated, “The school counseling profession historically has lacked clarity of role and function” (p. 34). DeKruyf, Auger, and Trice-Black (2013) suggested, “Throughout its history, the professional identity of school counselors has been an

elusive and fluid construct” (p. 271). Other scholars have noted that the role of school counsellor is under transformation (Bemak, 2000; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Curry & DeVoss, 2009; Erford et al., 2007; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; House & Sears, 2002). Moreover, specifically in the United States, the role now appears to include school counsellors functioning as student advocates or campaigners for social justice, a role that is substantiated by an extensive volume of American literature published since the 1990s (see Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010; Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010; House & Martin, 1998; House & Sears, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee & Rodgers, 2009; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Roysircar, 2009; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010; West-Olatunji, 2010).

One complexity of researching high school counsellors’ perceptions of their role is that current counselling discourse is weighed down by the past history of the profession and what others outside the profession believe it to be. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity: It is a challenge because the historical record of the school counselling profession is anachronistic and an opportunity because new research may contribute to a reconceptualisation of the role which may spark a role transformation altogether.

**School counsellor as student advocate.** The existing literature has demonstrated that while Canada and the United States have a shared history of the high school counselling profession with many of the school counselling movements originating in the United States (Van Hesteren, 1971), neither contemporary Canadian school counselling organizations nor Canadian scholarly discourse currently address the topic of student

advocacy to the same degree as do those in the United States. Furthermore, much of the American literature about school counsellors as student advocates unites issues of social justice with that of advocacy (see Bemak & Chung, 2005; Chen, Budianto, & Wong, 2010; Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010).

Just how school counsellors perceive and practice an advocacy role is not fully understood (Schaeffer, 2008). Past research, including American research, has not addressed the experiences of advocacy work as practiced by high school counsellors (Singh et al., 2010). Regarding how social justice advocacy is practiced by counsellors, Kennedy (2016) stated, “research from a Canadian school counsellor perspective is lacking” (p. 320). In addition to providing new data about how high school counsellors perceive their role, the data collected through this present Canadian study may address the school counsellor’s advocacy role. In doing so, it may contribute to new knowledge about the work of high school counsellors.

### **Purpose of Research**

There are three purposes of this study: First, it investigates the roles of high school counsellors as perceived by practitioners in a Canadian prairie setting and, second, it examines if these roles include advocating for or with youth. Third, this study introduces the notion that the role of high school counsellor should be reconceptualised to accurately reflect the work counsellors do.

### **Research Design**

A collective case study approach was used as a research design. Semi-structured individual interviews were held with twelve practicing high school counsellors. A more

complete explanation of the methodology used for this research appears in Chapter Three, *Research Methodology*.

**Research questions.** This study is based on the notion that the role of high school counsellors is often misunderstood by school division stakeholders or others interested in this discourse. Five primary questions were probed through a semi-structured interview with participants who were current high school counsellors in a Canadian prairie setting. They were:

Question 1: Tell me about your background and experience.

Question 2: Please describe the school in which you work.

Question 3: Describe your role and responsibilities.

Question 4: Option 1 (if participants have already referred to an example of advocacy: You have talked about situations in which you seem to be advocating for a student. Can you please expand on that aspect of your role? or, Option 2 (if participants have not yet included an example of advocacy): Are there times when you feel you have served as an advocate for a student? Tell me about those times.

Question 5: What challenges or risks do you encounter in your practice?

Additionally, each participant may have been asked to respond in a more detailed way with specific prompts posed by me as the researcher and interviewer.

Additionally, participants were asked to create and submit reflective electronic journals to the researcher over a four-week period after their interviews. Participants were hesitant to do so perhaps because the interview itself was thorough and they felt they had no more to add to the data-gathering process. Only two participants submitted electronic journal material; their narratives did not produce new data and so were omitted

from the reporting of findings in this study. According to O'Connell and Dymont (2011) reflective journals may not be a viable method to obtain data because of the lack of a suggested structure for the journaling activity or because they are perceived as being too time-consuming.

**Significance of the study.** Through this study's findings, the researcher hopes to illumine the work of high school counsellors, work that often is either unnoticed or unknown by others outside the profession, even other school personnel or school stakeholders. It is anticipated that this study will provide an understanding of if or how school counsellors in a Canadian setting advocate for or with students, and what advocacy work means to counsellors. Research about professional school counsellors is necessary to understand the significant role counsellors play in the life-making of students (Kim & Alamilla, 2008). Other contributions of this study include how school counsellors contribute to the school environment through leadership, liaise with students' parents and other community professionals, and provide front-line assistance to students with mental health needs. One of the outcomes of this research is to point toward a new frame for reconceptualising the role of the high school counsellor.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Study**

This research asked high school counsellors in a Canadian prairie setting to describe their perceptions of their role. The primary research question was, "*How do you perceive and practice your role and responsibilities?*" The purpose of the study is to build on and contribute to understandings of the role of high school counsellors with a potential specific focus on their advocacy work for and with students, research that appears insufficient in Canada.

**Assumptions.** I, as researcher, assume that school counsellors have a unique role within the school that is not well-known to those outside of the profession. I also assume that there may be no universal meaning of the word *advocacy*. Trusty and Brown (2005) provided a definition of *advocacy counselling* by explaining that school counsellors who advocate for and with students notice and identify students who are not experiencing wellbeing or academic success and then take action to impact change. In this study, participants for this research offered their own perspectives on student advocacy. At no time was the definition of advocacy assumed. This research is based on what the word *advocacy* meant to research participants and explored their view of advocacy.

**Limitations.** The results from this research cannot be considered generalizable to all roles and responsibilities of school counsellors or how counselling is practiced by all school counsellors; as the data reveal, each counsellor's role is determined by a number of external factors such as school and school division paradigms and administrative leadership. Regarding a propensity to either generalize or theorize from a case study approach, Stake (2005) stated, "Damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or to theorize runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself" (p. 448). Data were obtained based on individual interviews that included thick description, the "detailed, rich descriptions not only of participants' experiences of phenomena but also of the contexts in which those experiences occur" (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). The data provided a lens through which twelve individual high school counsellors perceive their role. As such, this study may contribute to new knowledge of a profession by providing the perspectives of current practicing counsellors. Leonard-Barton (1990) claimed that case study research is limited

because of its tendency towards “subjective interpretation” (p. 260); however, researcher interpretation is an integral component in this study’s rich findings that may contribute to scholarship in this field.

The work and scholarship of school counsellors may be unique in that it has a foot in two worlds: the first is as counsellors in a school environment and the second is as professional counsellors per se. Appropriately, literature from the wider discourse of the counselling profession is examined in this study only where it has relevance to the subject at hand.

**Delimitations.** A case study design was used to collect research data. According to Yin (2014), “case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 16). There may be three potential limitations associated with this method design: First, because case studies focus on specific experiences, some have argued that the contribution to theory is limited (Harland, 2014). Second, case study research can result in a large amount of data (Yin, 2014) which may be problematic for the researcher to organize and analyze. This may be balanced through the engagement of fewer research participants. This research was delimited to twelve participants from one geographic area, a Canadian prairie setting; however, data were collected from three school divisions, two urban and one rural to obtain as much variety as possible.

As a researcher who is also part of the group I am researching, high school counsellors, there is complexity in relation to being both an insider and an outsider (Kovach, 2009). This complexity may surface within this study through my over-

identification with research participants or my assumptions of the content of their narratives that an outside researcher may not have.

### **Definition of Terms**

Accompanying the varied role descriptions of school counsellors are the often indistinguishable and overlapping use of terms which permeate the Canadian and American literature. In regards to the correct use of terms in historical and contemporary school counselling discourse, neither widespread consensus prevails nor is there a clear demarcation as to when one term ceased and another began. Yet, because specific terms may transmit both ontological and epistemological connotations, it is a prudent exercise to examine the more commonplace terms and their significance to this research.

**School counsellor or guidance counsellor?** Even though the term *school counsellor* has been widely used in the literature since the new millennium (see Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Bemak, 2000; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Curry & DeVoss, 2009; Fitch & Marshall, 2004), the synonymous term *guidance counsellor* is still often used (see Bolan & Grainger, 2005; Durden, 2009; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Headley, 2010; Linnehan, Weer, & Stonely, 2011; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012; Taylor, 2002). There does not appear to be widespread conformity in the literature as to which term is preferred. For the purpose of this research, the term *school counsellor* is used with the understanding that this term encompasses the rich Canadian and American history of guidance counselling. The intentional use of *school counsellor* rather than *guidance counsellor* reflects the current context because *guidance counsellor* may represent an outdated discourse that reflects the profession's role to mainly provide vocational guidance to students (Bemak, 2000). Hoyt (1993), however, disagreed with

the replacement of the term *guidance* with *counselling*. He made the distinction that “counseling was universally viewed as one of the functions of guidance. Now, apparently, it has been decided that guidance is one of the functions of counseling” (p. 267). For this present research, the term school counsellor also includes the discourse of guidance counsellor (Keats & Laitsch, 2010).

The term *guidance* itself is a frequently-used term in school discourse and has a long-standing history that started with educators guiding students towards vocational success but expanded to including guiding students in physical and mental hygiene as well as future life success. Cubberley (1925) established that educational and vocational guidance in American schools should be available in junior and senior high schools to guide students towards employment that will bring both use to society and individual happiness; however, he also stated that *guidance* encompasses much more (Cubberley, 1925):

the guidance function of the school has been so expanded in recent years that today it comprehends far more than this, and includes educational guidance, health guidance, moral guidance, and social guidance during their school life, as well as vocational guidance towards its close. (p. 311)

Baxter (1948) claimed in an American publication that while several meanings of *guidance* exist, school guidance is concerned with correcting and preventing problems in children. Writing for a post-war audience, she further clarified that high school guidance is interested in the “vocational, educational, social, and emotional” (p. 202) needs of youth and is work carried out by teachers or “guidance workers” (p. 205), a term used by other mid-twentieth century scholars (Koos & Kefauver, 1932; Reed, 1964; Van Hesteren, 1971). Additionally, the term *counselling* in relation to vocational guidance was introduced early in the twentieth century. Brown (1922) published one of the earliest

notions of a “vocational counselor” (p. 5) whose role would be to give information about work and school.

**Advocacy.** The term *advocacy* as used in the school counselling literature is understood as a belief and approach whereby an individual or a group takes action to reverse injustices or advance conditions of another individual or group (House & Martin, 1998). As has been stated already, much of the school counselling (American) literature uses the word advocacy in tandem with the concept of social justice. But are all school counsellor advocacy initiatives linked to issues of social justice? In describing advocacy, a former president of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), Kuranz (2002) said,

A good advocate listens, communicates, embraces different points of view, sets goals, develops strategies, provides feedback, works with people no matter who is in charge, things on his or her feet, coordinates, mediates, juggles more than one job at a time, identifies resources, and sticks with a task until a solution is found. (p. 176)

Kuranz clearly does not unite the word advocacy with social justice even though there is a sea of scholarship that does so. How or if the school counsellors in this present study perceive and practice advocacy, if advocacy is practiced at all, is a goal of this research. In conducting this study, I was specifically interested in how or if school counsellors merge advocacy paradigms and practices with social justice awareness.

This research is not the first study in Canada to ask if advocacy counselling, if practiced at all, is guided by a social justice agenda. Young and Lalande (2011), in writing about the counselling profession in Canada, posed the same question. In reference to the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA), Young and Lalande wrote, “The CPA definition of counselling psychology refers explicitly to advocacy and to the

need to attend to the social and cultural contexts of counselling and clients' lives. It does not, however, explicitly use the term 'social justice'" (p. 252). Because the CPA refers to a Canadian association governing psychologists (and by extension school psychologists) and not school counsellors, its scope for this present research is limited and may be immaterial altogether. The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA), School Counsellors' chapter, offers networking and professional development opportunities to school counsellors but does not specify school counsellors' role in advocacy or social justice advocacy (*The School Counsellors' Chapter*, n.d.). A significant nuance of this present study is that school counsellors are not school psychologists; the two positions represent distinctly disparate professions.

**Tension.** The concept of *tension* is frequently spoken about in the reporting of my research findings. Hong, Falter, and Fecho (2017) conceptualise tension as "forces pulling in opposite directions that, on the surface, seem bent on outdoing each other" (p. 21). Although there is inherent tension in the activity of research itself (Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017), I perceived additional tension in the role of the counsellor as perceived by the research participants. Tension is also as a result of a lack of a coherent job description and ethical guidelines that refer specifically to the school counsellor's role. This tension is salient throughout much of the findings reported in this dissertation.

### **Situating the Research**

According to Seidman (2013), researchers should acknowledge their autobiographical origins. My own experience as a high school counsellor in Canada informs my point of entry (Schram, 2006) and the way I have conceptualised this research.

The school where I work has approximately 850 students with diverse backgrounds and needs: Approximately one-third of the student population are of Indigenous ancestry who reside in either urban or rural homes and another third are either immigrant or first, second-, or third-generation refugee students, representing about seventy different countries, who are classified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. These students are multilingual, express diverse faiths and customs, and many have lived in near-starvation or wartime conditions. This school also has a program for teen mothers and five infant and toddler daycares including an infant care house across the street. The ratio of full-time counsellors to students is approximately one counsellor for every four hundred students. Counselling in a school of such diverse needs has complexities, tensions, and rewards.

In a career of teaching and counselling that spans three decades, I have come to learn that school counsellors have unique and highly personal experiences of their work for and with students. I suspect that my own lived experiences are shared by other high school counsellors but may not be well-known to those outside of the profession. When students arrive at school each day, they bring multifaceted issues such as family dysfunction, socioeconomic concerns, ethnic or racial complexities, relational stress including relations with peers, trauma, mental wellness concerns (including addictions, self-harm, and suicide ideation), worries about academic functioning, and anxiety for their futures. I do not simply guide students; I become involved in their wellbeing, often entering trusting relationships with them.

My position as high school counsellor is tension-filled. I have experienced significant tension when I have conducted a suicide intervention for a student on a

Thursday and then, neither seeing nor being able to contact the student on Friday, have gone through the entire weekend wondering if the student is alive and safe. I understand the personal and family challenges that are experienced as a result of a refugee girl refusing to take part in an arranged marriage. I understand the frustrations when the provisions allowed by social services are insufficient to meet basic needs. To illustrate, I worked with a female student who was on the verge of being expelled from a private group home for rule infractions. The social worker told me there were no other options for her; I then asked the worker if the student was expected to sleep under a bridge that night. I understand concerns that place female students at risk when they are denied social assistance because they are living with their boyfriend and his family. I also understand that parents, when upset with specific teachers, can work through me to alleviate the tension and I understand that teachers, in turn, may need assistance to help communicate concerns back to parents. I believe I have a range of experiences advocating for and with students, what this means, and my own role in advocacy activities.

Rather than addressing possible dysfunction or deficiencies in the youth and their families, I choose to advocate for additional supports and problematize inflexibilities in the school space (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovnak, 2009; Specht, 2012) and in systems that are supposed to support those in need. I advocate for and with students by appealing to in-school and community professionals for the betterment of the students' wellbeing or to amend institutional policies and procedures for the students' benefit. The advocacy role is neither a prescribed requirement of my job as a high school counsellor in my school division nor is it a verbal requirement passed to me by my

supervisors. Nevertheless, I advocate for and with students daily and, moreover, I must often advocate for and with students in a clandestine manner because of the confidentiality guidelines I am obliged to uphold as a counsellor. I interpret these guidelines as complex, ambiguous, and competing expectations regarding student confidentiality. Strict confidentiality may not be able to be assured, and it may be problematic in terms of a school counsellor's scope of practice.

In carrying out my role and advocating for and with students, I call on specific teachers for personal favours and I have a clear demarcation of which teachers I can count on to be flexible and which ones I should avoid. I often catch staff members at a bad time, feel like I am adding one more thing to their workload when I ask them to make exceptions and provide academic extensions, promise them return kindnesses, and swear that I would not be advocating for and with a specific youth if it was not absolutely necessary.

My experiences give rise to further puzzlings about the role and responsibilities of other practicing high school counsellors and their personal and professional experiences, if any, of advocating for and with students. The nature of this research, therefore, is founded on these puzzlings as to how high school counsellors perceive *their* role and if advocacy work is evidential in *their* narratives.

Because much of what I do for and with students is neither written in a job description nor is brought to the attention of my superiors, I feel I often take tremendous professional risks. In dealing with a multitude of student crisis issues, such as suicide threat or ideation, I often second-guess my judgment because each crisis has unique circumstances. My days are filled with priorities which are dependent upon what the

students and their families request and need and also what other school personnel need from me. Additionally, I have so many time-sensitive ancillary and record keeping duties that directly helping students may often come second to the task at hand. Guiding students seems to be a very small part of my role, yet most people, including my supervisors, refer to my role as a *guidance counsellor*. Through this study, I have problematized this term for the role school counsellors have in students' lives and offer a more contemporary reflection of this complex profession.

Continuing research in education advances new knowledge on familiar settings by illuminating that which is either hidden or unfamiliar (Elliott & Lukeš, 2008). Charmaz (2010) said, "The social world is always in process, and the lives of the research subjects shift and change as their circumstances and they themselves change" (p. 195). This study may therefore offer a temporal reflection on the role of school counsellors as seen through the perceptions of a cohort of high school counsellors in Canada.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The problem, the research questions, and the significance of the study have been introduced in this current chapter, Chapter One, of this dissertation. This included an introductory summary of the shared history of school counselling in Canada and the United States, a very brief overview of the role of school counsellors with an introduction to the concept of counsellors as student advocates, and my own situated place within this study. Chapter Two reviews the literature which includes an examination of the vocational education movement, the movement which saw the inception of the school counselling profession. It also presents an overview of the mental testing and mental hygiene movements and their influences on school counselling practices. Additionally,

the literature about school counsellors as student advocates is reviewed. The literature points to a potential gap when comparing the school counselling discourse in Canada with that of the United States specifically in relation to social justice advocacy; while the American discourse speaks of high school counsellors who are social justice advocates for students, Canadian discourse does not in the same way. Contemporary issues in school counselling, drawn from participants' interview data, are also explored. The research methodology is discussed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four presents the findings. Chapter Five concludes the dissertation with data analysis, discussion, recommendations, and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

There appears to be no one universal perception of the role of a high school counsellor either by school counsellors themselves or other school personnel. While the role is rooted in a historical discourse that spans decades, its present-day context has apparent complexities, dilemmas, and tensions. The role has evolved considerably from the first *guidance workers* who guided students towards vocational interests to a profession whereby school counsellors simultaneously balance a multitude of intricate and clandestine tasks.

In an essay about grounded theory, Suddaby (2006) claimed that complex subjects might be best understood in their historical context. The review of literature that follows therefore provides a historical examination of the role of school counsellors in a Canadian and American chronological survey. It also investigates the literature related to the role as it is practiced in its current context. Additionally, it explores the role of school counsellors as student advocates.

#### **The Conceptual Framework for the Review of Literature**

The following literature review is a “scoping review” (Fawcett, 2013, p. 285). Fawcett (2013) stated, “A scoping review is conducted when the goal is to identify all literature about a broad topic and determine gaps in that literature” (p. 285). This, indeed, is the purpose of the literature review in the section which is to follow. It presents a chronological summary of the history of school counselling in Canada and the United States. While it is recognized that the school counselling movement was not restricted to these countries, it also is recognized that in discussing the Canadian history

one must also explore the American history; the two countries have a shared history because of their geographic proximity as well as linguistic and sociological commonalities. It is for this reason that this literature review examines the history of the profession in both nations.

The available scholarly work about the foundation of Canadian school counselling is sparse because much of the early and mid-twentieth century monographs are not easily obtainable. This review of literature about the history of school counselling in Canada therefore places a strong reliance on Van Hesteren's (1971) doctoral dissertation, *Foundations of the Guidance Movement in Canada*. Van Hesteren's work, as a historical record, details these important and necessary documents which give testimony to Canada's unique history of school counselling; however, absent from his work is the discourse regarding how school counselling was delivered, if at all, to Indigenous youth in residential schools. The literature review also uses a historical report published by The Counselling Foundation of Canada (2002) and a more recently-published Canadian article authored by Bezanson, Hopkins, and Neault (2016) on the history of career counselling in Canada. While The Counselling Foundation of Canada's report and Bezanson et al.'s article are specific to the historical context of career counselling in Canada, their contribution may also present significant Canadian milestones to the work of early school counsellors.

While much of the archival records on the history of school counselling in Canada were accessible, three records were not: Jackson (1934), Hincks (1926), and Parmenter (1941). These authors' contributions to the history of school counselling were important

to this work; therefore, there are three instances where they are referenced as being cited by later authors.

### **The Historical Record of School Counselling**

The history of school counselling (often referred to as *guidance* or *guidance counselling* as explained in Chapter One) in Canada followed the history of school counselling in the United States (Herr & Erford, 2007; Shertzer & Stone, 1974). Van Hesteren (1971) noted, “by the time guidance was being introduced in Canada on any significant scale, the concept had evolved to a fairly sophisticated level in the United States” (p. 8). This notion may not be specific to the history of school counselling but to other areas of educational discourse in Canada as well: Writing about the influence of the United States on the history of education in Canada, Johnson (1968) noted:

A most powerful feature of the Canadian environment is the fact that most of our population lives within three hundred miles of the United States. Our culture has been greatly influenced and largely moulded by this proximity to a great and dynamic neighbour. (p. 4)

While the American literature on the history of school counselling outweighs the Canadian literature, there are commonalities to both historical records. This review explores historical aspects that appear to be distinctly Canadian and distinctly American. The investigation of these distinct aspects is contained in the review.

**The vocational education movement.** Both Canada and the United States have common and unique histories of the foundation of the vocational education and vocational guidance movements, the forerunners to the present-day school counselling profession. These movements merit further exploration to uncover how they contributed to the profession as it is known today.

### *The rise of vocational education and guidance in early twentieth century*

*Canada.* With French and British settlement of Canada between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries came the formation of schools. While New France started trade schools to help new communities become autonomous (Lyons et al., 1991), British colonialists wanted to educate for both classical and practical reasons. While a classical education similar to what was known in England upheld an elite standard and position for British colonists in the new land, it wasn't very pragmatic.

It is believed that vocational education in Canada arose in the mid-1600s when artists and teachers came from France to teach the skill of rug making ("A Coming of Age," 2002). Later, vocational education was needed and promoted by industry to provide skilled labour and in 1910 the Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education was founded to support vocational education. In the early stages of vocational education in Canada, however, the needs of the societal workforce were regarded above the needs of the individual ("A Coming of Age," 2002).

Before further commenting on the history of school counselling as founded in the vocational education movement, the history on the rise of the school per se warrants disruption and should therefore be troubled. While not the scope of this present research, there is a corpus that anatomizes social theories of historical and present-day schooling (see Deacon, 2006; Deacon & Parker, 1995; Hillier & Hillier, 2012; Piro, 2008). Deacon (2006), using a Foucauldian perspective, held that "the early modern school was in many ways a model for the prison and the Panopticon itself, rather the other way around" (p. 122). Building on the societal paradigms of confinement and surveillance, Deacon (2006) suggested that schools were sociopolitical institutions that were founded on a

bedrock of discipline. Piro (2008), drawing from Foucault, said that the architecture of schools serves as an “instrument of control” (p. 41) whereby the “supervising, hierarchizing, and rewarding” (p. 42) of humans could take place.

Perceived “actual and feared moral deficiencies” (Deacon, 2006, p. 126) were to be rectified by schools which may have taken over where correctional institutions left off in a culture of penology. Deacon (2006) claimed, “The houses of correction, which had always accommodated inordinately large numbers of children, were too cumbersome, wasteful and inappropriate” (p. 127). Notwithstanding is the concept of corporal punishment used in schools until the late twentieth century. Schools became the institutions whereby children were excluded from society and then readmitted into society after correction and training (Deacon, 2006). Schools would provide society with a sophisticated form of “social control” (Leask, 2012, p. 58). It is through the nexus of schooling history and the history of vocational education that the position of school counsellor should be viewed. Its relevance to this present study is that while one could make an ontological assumption that school counsellors work on behalf of students, it can be said that counsellors, in being themselves disciplined subjects by schools, may be agents in the regulation, classification, and subordination of students.

It appears as though the roots of school counselling were planted in the early 1900s through such organizations as the Salvation Army, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) (Bezanson, Hopkins, & Neault, 2016). These organizations helped people to secure accommodation, training, and work. Bezanson et al. (2016) claimed that around 1912 Etta St. John Wileman lobbied for in-school career guidance and counselling. Wileman

was a crusader for the establishment of an employment office in Calgary. She was concerned with adult unemployment and she also crusaded against youth depending upon their own resources to find work (“A Coming of Age,” 2002).

According to Edson (1978), vocational guidance came from a movement between 1906 and 1917 to populate an industrial workforce and “reduce social disorganization” (p. 452). Widespread industrial growth changed the social fabric of both urban and rural areas. Large, northern American cities experienced a massive population increase as new immigrants, unemployed farmers, and minorities relocated in hopes of prosperity; however, what they experienced was the filth and dangers of industry accompanied by crowded housing (Aubrey, 1977).

World War I exposed substandard industrial progress in Canada and, in 1919, the Canadian government established the Technical Education Act which provided \$10,000,000 to the provinces over a ten-year span for technical education (Johnson, 1968; Lyons et al., 1991). Technical education became juxtaposed with vocational education in the early twentieth century (Johnson, 1968) and became a primary motive for the establishment and preservation of secondary schools.

The concept of junior high school was started in the United States in 1909 and, ten years later, in Winnipeg and Edmonton (Johnson, 1968) as industrialization shaped growth. Along with the emergence of junior high schools came the need for guidance and counselling positions to ensure that each student’s needs were addressed (Johnson, 1968). One such example existed in Vancouver’s Junior High School when, in 1922, it was recognized that youth needed assistance in selecting a vocation. Ontario started appointing vocational guidance workers in 1921 and, in 1925, technical teachers were

receiving vocational guidance education in their preparatory programs (Van Hesteren, 1971). The growth of guidance counselling, born from the vocational education and vocational guidance movements in Canada, was influenced by a rapidly changing society impacted by urbanization and industrialization (Robertson & Borgen, 2016; Van Norman, Shepard, & Mani, 2014).

The Great Depression in the 1930s saw unemployment numbers rise nation-wide and, because jobs were lacking, youth stayed in school longer. Across the nation compulsory school ages were raised and childhood was extended further (Deacon, 2006). Career guidance was led by laypersons and community workers (Van Norman et al., 2014). During this time a number of scholars recognized the need to study and promote vocational guidance: One such scholar was H. J. Jackson from McMaster University who recorded four recommendations in his master's theses (Jackson, 1934, as cited in Van Hesteren, 1971, p. 99): 1) minute study of each child's capacities and talents; 2) survey of industry and commerce to determine society's needs; 3) advice to the child based on these studies and the consideration of his economic status, and other possible obstacles; and, 4) placement service. He later would recommend the training and placement of counsellors in Ontario schools. Some additional scholars brought to Canada knowledge about guidance from their studies in America thereby blending the guidance movement between the two countries (Van Hesteren, 1971). When war struck again in 1939, Canada, as a former British colony, intensified her industrial capabilities as the Nazi blitzkrieg destroyed much of Britain's manufacturing strength (Lyons et al., 1991) thereby requiring more skilled workers in Canada. The Canadian population grew

immensely during this time and, by the late 1930s, formalized guidance was necessary to meet the needs of youth and society in Canada (Van Hesteren, 1971).

In post-World War II, the paradigm of “fitting the person to the job” (Bezanson et al., 2016, p. 220) became paramount. There was a shift in focus, however, into the 1950s and 1960s when vocational counselling approaches, influenced by the work of Carl Rogers, tended to focus more on the individual rather than the workforce. In 1961, Canada’s unemployment rate was 7.1% (Van Norman et al., 2014). By 1963, most Canadians were working but earning poverty-level wages. In response, there were initiatives by postsecondary institutions to train and provide professional school counsellors (Van Norman et al., 2014). In 1965, the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association, the precursor to the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, was formed to provide leadership to professional counselling (Bezanson et al., 2016). By the 1990s, counselling programs existed in schools in every Canadian province (Van Norman et al., 2014).

***The silent record of the rise of guidance in Canada’s Indian residential schools.***

While the rise of vocational education and guidance in Canada was shaped by the ideals of democracy and individual freedom of choice (Van Hesteren, 1971), it appears to have been so only for European settlers and subsequent generations. From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, Canada’s Indigenous children were absent from the provincial school systems and therefore are absent in the narrative about the rise of vocational education and guidance because, as Episkew (2009) claimed, “Indigenous people were not constituted in the ideology of the empire” (p. 24).

The colonial government felt that Indigenous children could not be assimilated if they did not become Christian; hence, the establishment of church-run residential schools and in 1920, the government stipulated compulsory attendance (Episkenew, 2009). It may be because “running the business of the schools became more important than providing a good, or even adequate, education for the students” (p. 49) that the record of the rise of formal guidance in residential schools (in the same way as provincial schools) appears to be silent. This is not to say, however, that vocational education was absent in residential schools. Indigenous children received mandatory vocational training at residential schools. MacDonald and Hudson (2012) noted, “The school day consisted of a half-day of studies, then a half-day of trades-related activities: blacksmithing, carpentry or auto mechanics for boys, sewing, cooking and other domestic activities for girls” (p. 431). Additionally, training Indigenous children to be farmers was a cornerstone of assimilation with colonial authorities serving as instructors (even though Indigenous families on the prairies knew more about farming than did the instructors) (Episkenew, 2009).

*The Industrial Revolution and the rise of vocational guidance in America.* In the United States, the motivation for keeping youth in school was also driven by industry. Industry kept children in either physical or sexual enslavement and it was felt that children needed to be protected from industry or even their parents (Hillier & Hillier, 2012). Industrial growth also demanded a more skilled and diverse workforce which necessitated schools and a more complex curricula. Students were thus spending longer hours in school not because educators deemed it necessary but because schools were tasked with responding to the demands of industry and the literacy needs of immigrants

(Aubrey, 1977). When vocational education shifted children from the workforce to the school, however, it may have impacted the home because of lost wages and labour (Deacon, 2006).

It is out of the industrial environment that the vocational education and vocational guidance movement grew and came to have overlapping histories (Aubrey, 1977; Herr, 2013). Vocational education in America can be traced as far back as 1895 when George Merrill started a school guidance program in San Francisco (Herr & Erford, 2007; Savickas, 2009; Schmidt, 2008). Merrill's leadership of vocational education saw teachers counselling students about choices in occupations (Savickas, 2009). In 1899, the first president of the University of Chicago, William Harper, predicted that personnel to help students would soon be common in all schools (Shertzer & Stone, 1974). In Detroit, Michigan, Jesse B. Davis, a high school counsellor and principal, insisted that English teachers incorporate into their lessons guidance activities aimed at suitable conduct and vocational planning (Aubrey, 1977; Schmidt, 2008). The ideals of Davis were aligned with a group of progressive educators which included John Dewey who believed schools could improve lives.

**The work of early school counsellors.** Between the years of 1928 and 1934, Fitch (1935) conducted a study of the "organization of counseling in the school systems" (p. xi) whereby the roles of American school counsellors and the circumstances in which they work were examined. Sponsored by the New York School of Social Work, this study represented one of the first and most comprehensive studies of the work of school counsellors at a time when vocational guidance counselling was broadening to other forms of counselling. The 105 vocational counsellors interviewed in Fitch's study

reported doing these tasks (pp. 31-33): (a) administrative duties, clerical work, case work and recording case histories; (b) classifying pupils in ability groups; (c) conferences with teachers, parents, students, and dropouts; (d) coordinating with welfare agencies; (e) counselling for educational, vocational, moral, social, and health needs; (f) supervision; (g) dealing with discipline cases; (h) working with handicapped pupils and health problems; (i) interviewing and following up with failing students; (j) teaching and supervising classes; (k) collecting and disseminating occupational information; (l) job placements; (m) program planning; (n) record keeping; (o) research and activities associated with scholarships; (p) testing; and, (q) visiting homes.

The question of whether school counsellors provided counselling for only vocational purposes or if they also provided a more far-reaching service to students was answered through this study. Its relevance to this research is that from the early days of school counselling, counsellors appeared to have multi-faceted and numerous functions involving administration, secretarial duties, record keeping, and case management. The findings from this present research may shed light on whether or not this is still the case.

**The Great Depression and beyond.** School guidance programs that were launched before the Great Depression began to include personal and moral guidance in addition to vocational guidance as the 1930s progressed. The Great Depression and its relation to widespread unemployment also saw the placement of more vocational counsellors in some jurisdictions (Super, 1955). In some cases, policy makers believed the position of guidance counsellor was a fringe extravagance because the position did not directly relate to a school's primary purpose of teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2002).

*School counselling in the later twentieth century.* Later twentieth century trends shifted the focus of school counsellors. In 1957, guidance programs became more focused on students' academic achievement after the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, *Sputnik I* (Schmidt, 2008; Shertzer & Stone, 1974). Funding brought on by The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 sparked a boom in education generally and school counsellor jobs specifically because special institutes geared towards the specialized training of counsellors were introduced. Accompanying this growth was an increase in scholarly writing about school counselling which continued in the next decades (Baker, 2001; Nunley, 1963). The 1960s became awash with groups of people expressing oppression and alienation and the Civil Rights and women's liberation movements drew additional attention to matters of systemic inequity. While there was a growing awareness that more support was needed for children and youth in schools, the pedagogical literature began to call for school counsellors to be agents of change within a multicultural and multiethnic population that lasted into the next decades (Baker, 2001). Baker (2001) noted, "A unifying theme in these writings was that counselors should not rely on passive, reactive listening...because students needed help dealing with dysfunctional systems that were impeding them" (p. 77). The 1990s saw an increase in awareness of school counsellors serving youth at-risk and continued attention for school counsellors to respond to a diverse student population.

Paisley and McMahon (2001) observed that although the school counselling profession had its roots in youth vocational and moral growth, throughout the decades of the twentieth century the profession expanded to include areas influenced by "the social, political, economic, and psychological issues facing schools, communities, families,

children, and adolescents” (p. 106). Critical to its expansion were the mental testing and mental hygiene movements, movements which influenced early school counselling in both Canada and the United States. How these movements impacted the work of school counsellors is essential in understanding the evolving role and responsibilities of the school counselling profession.

**The mental testing movement.** The contribution to intelligence testing that resulted from the introduction of the Binet-Simon scale in 1911 was that individuals could be tested for the distinctions of *normal* or *abnormal* intelligence. According to Cicciola, Foschi, and Lombardo (2014), Binet and Simon’s battery created a diagnostic scale to test children considered abnormal. The use of this test placed children in the categories of *idiocy*, *imbecility*, and *weak of mind* (p. 226). In a critique of the Binet-Simon test, Schmitt (1912) stated,

The object of a test or a series of tests of mental ability is to aid one in a short time to analyze and diagnose mental deviates whose deviations has caused social maladjustment, and to the measure in some wise the extent of the deviation from the normal. (p. 186)

Differentiation for gifted children or those who had above-average intelligence appears not to have been an element in Binet and Simon’s 1905 initial metric scale instrument (see Nicolas, Andrieu, Croizet, Sanitioso, & Burman, 2013).

Intelligence testing as first popularized in the early twentieth century directed the scope of school counselling in Canada and the United States because testing was used to channel youth into specific vocational tracks and, in the United States, military service. Testing became popular in the 1920s as a way to diagnose students with academic difficulties (Wright, 2012) and as a method through which schools could “sort and stream

their students by ability on an unprecedented scale” (J. Ellis, 2013, p. 401) which meant that groups of children were intentionally separated.

While the connection between the popularity of testing in schools and school counsellors is not clear, Van Hesteren (1971) claimed, “Tests covering the various aspects of human functioning became and remained very important tools in the hands of counsellors” (p. 42). Naugle (2009) stated that student testing in various forms has always been considered part of a school counsellor’s job and Schmidt (2008) emphasized the mental testing movement’s contribution to guidance counselling because of its emphasis on individual student traits and its importance to vocational planning. Bezanson et al. (2016) described this notion as the “test and tell” (p. 220) era of career counselling.

At the start of the twentieth century, Frank Parsons of Boston, the “father of vocational guidance” (Shertzer & Stone, 1974, p. 24), concluded that a systematic method of channeling youth towards specific vocations was necessary. He suggested that the “capabilities, interests, and temperaments” (p. 24) of youth needed to be analyzed before occupations could be explored. This paradigm took root in vocational education and, in tandem with America’s interest in mental testing for military fitness, the use of psychometrics became popular. Group intelligence tests and standardized achievement tests as well as the use of interest inventories then became popular for use in schools to categorize and separate students.

Aubrey (1977) stated that the “Parsonian triad of diagnosis, information, and placement” (p. 291) restricted vocational counsellors because of its tendency to overlook other factors such as “social class, motivation, ethnicity, values, and longitudinal

development” (p. 291). Herr (2013) stated that the vocational guidance movement itself is interrelated with the rise in the testing advances because a new type of educator, the school counsellor, would be needed to decode testing results to help students make sound occupational decisions; however, Baker (2001) stated, “The relationship between tests and counseling still appears to be an endangered one” which hints that the relationship between mental testing and school counsellors is still ambiguous.

**The mental hygiene movement.** The basis for the mental hygiene movement was the belief that adult mental illness could be averted if issues were addressed in children and youth, a belief that was fuelled by the popularity of Freud’s psychoanalysis at the start of the twentieth century (Wright, 2012). The movement caught the attention of school stakeholders and soon “the morality, sexuality, work habits, and mental ability were all fair game for well-meaning school counselors” (Wright, 2012, p. 11). Additionally, societal consensus in the first part of the twentieth century held the paradigm that social-personal issues could be viewed with a scientific or pathogenic lens (Dickinson, 1993; Richardson, 1989).

As early as 1909, the American National Committee for Mental Hygiene was formed with its Canadian counterpart, the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene (CNCMH) coming soon after in 1918 (Griffin, 1989; Richardson, 1989). Armstrong-Hough (2015) suggested the CNCMH’s inception year was 1919 because of Canada’s involvement in World War I. Nevertheless, this committee was initiated to improve the care of the insane and to apply preventative mental illness measures in institutions such as prisons and schools (Dickinson, 1993).

The early twentieth century socially-constructed categories of infancy, childhood, and adolescence are critical to the understanding of the mental hygiene movement (Richardson, 1989). Professionals other than parents alone began to take interest in the wellbeing of children and youth. What resulted was the transference of authority over childhood development to experts outside the family such as doctors, social workers, and teachers. The concept of the childhood gaze, influenced by Foucault's study of asylums in France, influenced the mental hygiene movement because of its attention to matters of mental health in children (Richardson, 1989). It became important to identify "mentally disordered" (Richardson, 1989, p. 5) children. This paradigm had a specific impact on how schools viewed children and youth.

Those who dealt with youth in juvenile courts and schools believed that the damage had been done by the time children reached school age; therefore, mental hygienists focused on parental influence upon a child's mental health (Hincks, 1926, as cited in Dickinson, 1993). This was during the time of massive immigration to Canada making most children the offspring of those foreign-born (Richardson, 1989). Richardson (1989) noted that between 1869 and 1919, 73,000 children were sent from the United Kingdom to Canada under charitable sponsorships. Orphaned or unsupervised children were suspect and could be considered dangerous; therefore, the mental hygiene movement in Canada focused on the "moral dangers of Canada's immigrant population" (Armstrong-Hough, 2015, p. 209).

In Canada, the link between the mental hygiene movement and guidance occurred in 1929 when Silverman, Assistant Director of the Mental Hygiene Committee of Montréal, said that vocational guidance was a necessary component of adolescent mental

hygiene (Van Hesteren, 1971). Silverman (1929) claimed, "...juvenile delinquency is becoming a problem of ever increasing importance, and that the evidences of mental maladjustments, such as are represented by vocational and social failures, are becoming more and more manifest..." (p. 308). He further stated, "It is a maxim of mental hygiene that in order to be mentally healthy and happy one of the requirements that a person must meet is satisfactory adjustment to his work" (p. 403). Thus, the mental hygiene movement deeply impacted school guidance and counselling in Canada.

In 1940, Griffin (a member of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in Canada), Laycock (professor of educational psychology at the University of Saskatchewan), and Line (of the University of Toronto) published *Mental Hygiene: A Manual for Teachers* in which preventative measures to future social problems could and should be taken in both Canadian and American schools. Griffin, Laycock, and Line (1940) said:

The partnership between education and mental hygiene is being stimulated by a growing conviction that many personal and social ills that beset our present-day civilization could have been prevented by more enlightened and understanding arrangements in our schools and homes. (p. vii)

The authors supported testing in schools and the school placement of psychologists and psychiatrists.

The mental hygiene movement's pervasive impact upon education was that "maladjusted personalities" (Kearl, 2014, p. 286) were to be separated from mainstream education. The movement contributed greatly to an expanded school counsellor role because personal concerns other than those of a vocational nature needed to be addressed (Gysbers, 2001; Van Hesteren, 1971). According to Wright (2012), the mental hygiene

model supported school counsellors using a clinical approach which stressed diagnosis and subsequent work with students.

**Comprehensive guidance programs.** In Canada in the first part of the twentieth century, teachers were expected to carry out the functions of guidance because they were the disseminators of information (Aubrey, 1977; Savickas, 2009; Schmidt, 2008; Van Hesteren, 1971). More schools started hiring dedicated school counsellors, however, and counsellors began to replace teachers in offering information, particularly vocational information, to students. Specific guidance programs began to emerge because of the necessity to offer information and services to large groups so that more students may benefit.

Guidance programs were comprehensive programs which rested on four goals of service to students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001, p. 248): a) vocational and career guidance; b) developmental guidance and counselling which emphasizes lifelong development and growth and is delivered via curricula; c) the efficacy of guidance and counselling; and, d) accountability and evaluation of services. Guidance programs were thus seen as school-wide with the intent on servicing entire school populations.

One of the first guidance programs was started at Danforth Technical School in Ontario as described by Parmenter (1941, as cited in Van Hesteren, 1971). This guidance program had at least eight functions: gathering student background information, administering intelligence and aptitude tests, teaching an occupational course for post-graduation options, organizing special subject talks by teachers, arranging talks by former students of actual work experiences, offering specific occupational information to students in practical subjects, offering testing and counselling to students for school or

vocational issues, and assisting students with post-graduation employment options. The numerous functions provided by this early comprehensive guidance program attests to the many roles that mid-twentieth century school counsellors were expected to uphold.

Nunley (1963) claimed that, in the United States, public school stakeholders were reluctant to initiate guidance programs in schools until 1958; however, the literature clearly shows that widespread guidance programs existed in many American jurisdictions long before (see Bennett, 1937; Miller, 1940; Thomas, 1930; Traxler, 1942). Nunley articulated the difficulties with establishing school guidance programs and the placement of subsequent school counsellors as complications in rapport with administrators, faculty, student, and community. In instituting a guidance program where one did not exist prior, Nunley suggested:

To enhance further the success of his position, the counselor should express a desire to have the faculty help recommend his duties. After all, there will be some feeling among them that they, collectively, did this work last year without him. (p. 270)

Nunley's work is included in this review to emphasize that the evolving role of school counsellors may have been shaped by other professionals in the school and may still contribute to an "ambiguous role definition" (Paisley & McMahon, 2001, p. 107). By the 1970s guidance programs were flourishing (Aubrey, 1977) in both Canada and the United States and continued to do so in the 1980s and 1990s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

### **The Current Role of High School Counsellors**

A review of current school counselling literature suggests that there may be no one source that describes all the role of school counsellors; additionally, Burnham and Jackson (2000) claimed, "Even school counselors have differing views about their role and how to best use their time and skills" (p. 41). This presupposition may lend

additional support for how this present study contributes to the body of scholarly discourse about the work of high school counsellors.

In writing about twenty-first century American school counselling, Paisley and McMahon (2001) stated that the school counsellor role is “ambiguous” and, “Attending to all demands for time and programming can place counselors in the unrealistic position of trying to be all things to all people” (p. 107). They continued by saying that school counsellors carry the following roles in heavy counsellor-student ratios (p. 107): 1) provide individual and small group counselling sessions; 2) conduct classroom guidance interventions; 3) consult with parents, teachers, administrators, and community agency representatives; 4) advocate for all students to enhance educational experiences and outcomes; 5) build partnerships and teams within and outside of the school; 6) be a member of school leadership and policy-making groups; 7) provide individualized, focused, and intensive interventions for at-risk students; 8) be the developmental specialist in the school setting; 9) be the mental health specialist in the school setting; 10) provide family counselling interventions; 11) coordinate school-wide programs including peer helping, peer mediation, conflict resolution, and teacher advisory programs; 12) prevent suicides, pregnancies, dropouts, drug use, and general moral decay; and, 13) maintain the necessary levels of expertise in all of the above areas to ensure quality in all interventions and programs. Paisley and McMahon also stated that school counsellors are asked to collect, organize, and demonstrate data in keeping with school goals; respond to diverse cultural, linguistic, and special needs students; demonstrate accountability and effectiveness; and, conduct program evaluation. This extensive list

attests to the belief that the role and responsibilities of school counsellors may be considerable and therefore overwhelming.

Perhaps one of the best sources of information regarding the current role and responsibilities of high school counsellors is to examine the topics of textbooks which are used in the formal education of counsellors, textbooks which are vast in number. By way of example, four are noted, two American and two Canadian:

One of the most comprehensive texts is Coleman and Yeh's (2008) edited text *Handbook of School Counselling*. This is an American text which features the work of numerous scholars. The most notable chapters focus on a) student equity; b) supporting immigrant students; c) issues of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, disability, and gender; d) personal, social, health (including sexual health), and emotional development needs; e) student literacy; student career development; counsellor supervision; multicultural competence; consultation with in-school and community agencies; individual, group, and family counselling and intervention; f) crisis management; counselling the gifted; interpersonal relationships; suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention; g) student failure; bullying and victimization; h) school violence; substance abuse; law; and ethics. Each topic requires vast understandings and together form an immense and daunting agenda for school counsellors. Erford's (2007) edited text, also American, claimed multi-authored scholarly work and is titled *Transforming the School Counselling Profession*. Its chapters examine ethical, legal, and professional issues of school counselling; multicultural competence (including affirming diversity and challenging oppression); achievement advocacy; creating a data-driven counselling

program; developmental guidance; youth at risk; conflict resolution and peer mediation; and counselling students with disabilities including mental and emotional disorders.

Although not pertaining directly to school counselling, *Canadian Counselling and Counselling Psychology in the 21st Century*, edited by Sinacore and Ginsberg (2015), features multiple authors contributing chapters relating to multicultural education and counselling people from Indigenous backgrounds; counselling people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex; counselling immigrants; health and wellness; and a social justice agenda for counsellors in Canada. Likewise, France, Rodríguez, and Hett's edited (2013) book *Diversity, Culture and Counselling: A Canadian Perspective*, although not specific to school counselling, focuses on issues involving gender and multicultural counselling. Paisley and McMahon's (2001) list of roles and all four of the aforementioned texts suggest that counsellors require broad skills with extensive and specific knowledge to be effective in their role. How and if the topics suggested in these texts are presented and managed by practicing school counsellors may be a rich discovery of this research.

Specific to this doctoral research is a focus on school counsellors who may identify as student advocates. It can be assumed by the reader that all cited work in the section to follow is American unless indicated as Canadian. The significance of this review is to identify what is said (or not said) about advocacy and to recognize and affirm the gap that exists in the Canadian literature about school counsellor student advocacy.

**School counsellors and student advocacy.** According to Kiselica and Robinson (2001), advocacy counselling refers to counsellors who go beyond traditional measures to help students. Trusty and Brown's (2005) review of advocacy competencies claimed a

school counsellor-advocate notices and identifies students who are not achieving academically and then takes action to impact change for student success and wellbeing. This means that opportunities for school counsellor advocacy work may present themselves in the lack of academic achievement among students; however, this approach is a reactive one. Conversely, a proactive approach holds the view that school counsellor-advocates assume that all students are able to achieve and that counsellors are central figures in assisting students to do so (House & Martin, 1998; Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002). A “developmental advocate” (Galassi & Akos, 2004, p. 146), also a proactive approach, works to shape the environment to promote healthy development among youth. Both a reactive and proactive approach may be found to be important positions of a school counsellor’s advocacy role and both approaches could be enacted for or with students. School counsellors might advocate for and with students who self-harm, have suicide ideation, have diagnosed or undiagnosed psychological disorders including eating disorders, or who are stressed because of trauma or family dysfunction (Bragg, Kornder, & Schellenberg, 2011). What is problematic here is the notion that school counsellors may be working outside of their bounds of competence: While school counsellors communicate with students’ parents or guardians and often refer students to mental health professionals external to the school, they may find themselves directly facing issues for which they have not had sufficient education or experience.

*Social justice and school counsellor student advocacy.* In schools, some students find wellbeing and success more easily than others. While there are a multitude of institutional, personal, or relational reasons for why some students do not graduate from high school, much of the literature points to issues of social justice for students’

lack of achievement. Lee and Rodgers (2009) claimed that advocacy work is a moral and social imperative and therefore is social justice work. Social justice refers to “the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 17). Field and Baker (2004) asserted that there are students who are invisible, unheard, or undervalued in school. School counsellors who work for and with such youth may be operating from a social justice perspective.

Educators who are committed to social justice may believe that there are societal inequities that are mirrored in school (Chung & Bemak, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Counsellors who advocate for and with students may have a commitment to social justice issues with a specific lens on school climate, policies, and practices. The American literature suggests that advocacy counselling promotes social justice (Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Chen et al., 2010; Chung & Bemak, 2012; Dean, 2009; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee & Rodgers, 2009; Parikh et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2010; Roysircar, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). The evolution towards social justice work in schools can even be called a “movement” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 483).

Some believe that social justice advocacy fits well with the work of school counsellors because the issues that affect students should be seen systemically (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; West-Olatunji, 2010) meaning that students cannot be isolated from the systemic interplays between personal, family, and community relations. This understanding insinuates that a counsellor-advocate would consider and act upon school-related as well as external factors in a student’s life when working with a student who is not experiencing school success and wellbeing. It may be argued that a counsellor who

overlooks systemic inequities might be said to aid in their perpetuation (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Martin, 1998; House & Sears, 2002).

While not addressing issues of student advocacy directly, some Canadian scholars have documented the connection between the historical roots of career counselling to social justice (Bezanson et al., 2016) and the counselling profession's foundation in social justice (Arthur & Collins, 2014).

***Potential challenges to student advocacy.*** While school counsellor advocacy appears to have widespread application, it is not without criticism. Despite their potential awareness of inequity in schools, many counsellors resist the advocacy role as well (Bemak & Chung, 2008). While some counsellors may agree in principle that student advocacy is necessary, they may not know how to practice advocacy (West-Olatunji, 2010). The literature supports the notion that resistance to advocacy work may emerge for multiple reasons from counsellors, students, and institutions.

***Counsellor resistance to advocacy work.*** Perhaps one of the foremost reasons most counsellors do not adopt an advocacy role is that they do not want to be perceived as agitators (Bemak & Chung, 2005). The term *Nice Counsellor Syndrome* (NCS) (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Chung & Bemak, 2012) refers to counsellors who wish to be perceived by others as nice. They are comfortable in their roles, are helpful team players, and place a tremendous value on keeping the peace; however, in doing so, they may perpetuate the status quo of the school environment (Bemak & Chung, 2008). If they do challenge an academic injustice, such as inquiring about a teacher's inflexibility to adapt instruction for a specific student, they may be told that they have overstepped their bounds (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

In addition, many counsellors do not want to take the personal or professional risk of being disapproved and possibly reprimanded. Bemak and Chung (2008) claimed that numerous school counsellors resist multicultural and social justice advocacy because the role of advocate is contrary to the assumption and bias of many seeing the counsellor as nice and noncontroversial. “To advocate, to challenge, to confront, and to take a leadership role in moving a school system forward toward social equity is to risk tension and discord with supervisors and peers” (Bemak & Chung, 2005, p. 198). Some counsellors may be afraid of professional rejection and this is “...a strong inhibitor in becoming a multicultural/social justice advocate and organizational change agent” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 375).

Bemak and Chung (2008) also claimed that once counsellors are mindful of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic inequalities, they may feel guilty or uneasy resulting in a less motivated approach towards advocacy work. This awareness may even result in counsellors’ understanding of their own “privilege and power” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 487) over others. Smith et al. (2009) stated:

This phenomenon has the potential to expand on an evolving social caste system in the counseling profession whereby the advocate assumes a higher level expert position, and the oppressed assumes greater dependency on the advocate, thus, potentially forfeiting any power that the oppressed possesses. (p. 487)

Smith et al. also suggested that counsellors who function as advocates might assume an elitist attitude above counsellors who do not function as social justice advocates. Furthermore, they may push a victim mentality upon their clients as society or systems of power are blamed for the social ills that have oppressed the client.

A school counsellor who campaigns against inequitable educational policies and practices may risk professional and personal tension such as resentment and opposition

from peers (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Lee & Rodgers, 2009). A counsellor-advocate who declares that accepted school, school division, or governmental practices and procedures may actually harm students from non-privileged backgrounds may become professionally and personally segregated from the majority of educators. Kincheloe (2008) said that such educators may even be regarded as “dangerous subversives” (p. viii) and may risk being fired from their jobs. Some counsellor-advocates feel they may be ostracized by their peers (West-Olatunji, 2010) and so may be resistant to the advocacy role. While professional autonomy may be integral to the counsellor-advocate role, autonomy may be more difficult to achieve in a school environment where conformity is valued.

Apathy may also account for counsellor resistance to acts of advocacy. Bemak and Chung (2008) suggested apathy may shield counsellors from conflict with fellow faculty who do not share a multicultural or social justice paradigm. Some school counsellors may be overwhelmed and may not have the energy to take on colleagues and administrators in advocating for and with students. They may multitask extremely complex and emotional situations, undertake administrative or clerical duties (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Field & Baker, 2004), supervise students, and may be the sole providers of vocational guidance involving extensive paperwork for post-secondary and scholarship applications.

The reality of “compassion fatigue” (Figley, 2002), which lessens one’s capacity to care for others, may be especially applicable to school counsellors. Many counsellors strive to have a student-centred focus amidst many other duties that are demanded of them such as collaboration with in-school and out-of-school professionals and agencies,

contributing to a school's numerous other time-consuming requirements (such as a multitude of staff and department meetings), supervising extra-curricular activities, maintaining accurate record keeping, and participating in professional growth. The capacity to be reflexive representatives of advocacy may be absent altogether because of the busy-ness of their demanding workloads. Compassion fatigue may impact a school counsellor's "emotional availability" (Hamilton, 2008, p. 9) even to themselves or their families.

*Personal agendas.* Smith, Reynolds, and Rovnak (2009) claimed that some counsellors may have a tendency to advocate for particular professional or systemic matters which implies a counsellor-centred political or personal agenda. A counsellor-advocate may have personal or political interests, actualized in "hidden agendas" or "self-promotion" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 487).

*Student resistance to counsellor advocacy.* Although not pervasive in the literature, "client resistance" (West-Olatunji, 2010, p. 1) must also be acknowledged. In the school context, there could be occasions when students do not wish the counsellor to advocate for or with them. Some students may feel that the act of advocacy might segregate them from others or place them into a separate or special category. Many students navigate uneasy tensions with teachers and do not wish to draw further attention to themselves through a counsellor's advocacy initiative. They may express interest in keeping the status quo which may require the counsellor to abandon an advocacy approach.

*Institutional resistance to advocacy work.* "Institutional resistance" (West-Olatunji, 2010, p. 2) may also be a factor in opposing social justice advocacy in the

schools because of the hierarchical foundation present within school institutions. Moving towards an advocacy approach may instill systemic change; change in education is a slow progression that is often met with widespread resistance (Fullan, 2011). While school stakeholders might admit that individual students face a variety of personal, familial, community, and academic obstacles to achievement, school counselling programs are often still seen as supplemental to the greater enterprise of teaching and learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2002); thus, school counsellor student advocacy may not be supported by in-school or system administrations. This represents a significant barrier to counsellor advocacy work.

While school counsellor student advocacy is clearly a growing trend within the school counselling profession, specifically in the United States, the literature suggests that there may be strong resistance to this role. It leads to puzzlings about how school counsellors are advocates for and with youth and what counsellor-advocates experience personally and professionally as a result of their advocacy work.

*A perceived gap in Canadian research about counsellor-advocates.* Recent American research has revealed an interest in linking school counsellors with student advocacy (see Agramovich & Harris, 2007; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Chen et al., 2010; Field & Baker, 2004; Galassi & Akos, 2004; House & Martin, 1998; Trusty & Brown, 2005); however, no research could be found that reports data from school counsellors' perspectives regarding their advocacy work for and with students. A review of the *ProQuest* dissertation database as well as *Theses Canada* (Library and Archives Canada) reveals that research in Canada does not include the topic of school counsellors who report working as student advocates. The contemporary

American literature, however, illustrates that there is a current movement towards the transformation of the school counsellor role to include advocacy work for and with students. The Canadian literature does not do so in the same way.

**Contemporary issues in the role of high school counsellors as evidenced in the literature.** High school counsellors may encounter complexities in their work with youth that are also found in the wider body of literature pertaining to the work school counsellors do. The following illustrates some of the contemporary issues this study's counsellor-participants spoke about. Embedding these issues in the wider literature helps to address their complexity and context.

*High school counsellors and their work for and with Indigenous youth.* High school counsellors may observe issues of equity in relation to Indigenous youth and their families. White, Atkinson, Berdahl, and McGrane (2015) spoke about “significant economic and social disadvantages (p. 281) for Indigenous individuals in Canada. These social disadvantages may be experienced by Indigenous students in provincial schools. Furthermore, Paquette and Fallon (2008) stated, “There is a virtual absence of policy framework that clearly defines the nature, content, and extent of First Nations rights to education” (p. 348). It therefore appears as though widespread structures, including funding, may not be in place for the educational success of Indigenous students.

It may be argued that provincial schools, both rural and urban, may still be ensnared in a harmful legacy of colonialism (Wotherspoon, 2008) which brands Indigenous youth as *other*. Indigenous students in provincial schools are regulated by a sovereign social agency, the school, through which a Foucauldian gaze may be exercised. Holligan (1999) explained that a Foucauldian gaze, derived from Foucault's *Discipline*

*and Punish*, is exercised when others are regulated through agencies who exercise “inspection...discipline...and governmentality” (p. 138).

School counsellors may be concerned for the present and future wellbeing of Indigenous students in Canada. These concerns align with the stark reality that many Indigenous students do not graduate high school in this region. One prairie provincial auditor’s report stated that in 2009, the grade twelve graduation rate within three years of entering grade ten was 72.3% for all students province-wide and 32.7% for Indigenous students (“2012 Report,” 2012, p. 31). McIntosh, Moniz, Craft, Golby, and Steinwand-Deschambeault (2014) suggested that there is a “dissonance” (p. 237) between schools’ predominant Western culture and Indigenous cultures. They also claimed that, “Indigenous students are 1.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability and 3.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with a behaviour disorder than the general student population” (p. 237).

Counsellors may also be concerned that there are few Indigenous teachers in their schools. Young et al. (2010) found that Indigenous teachers’ identities are often overshadowed by the “dominant narrative of colonization” (p. 298) that also exists in the wider Canadian social discourse.

***Ambiguity of the counsellor’s role.*** Counsellors may feel ambiguous about their role and the perception that other school personnel may have about their role. Kendrick, Chandler, and Hatcher (1994) observed, “A major stressor for many counselors may be the lack of a clearly defined role” (p. 365) and Butler and Constantine (2005) suggested, “Role conflict and role ambiguity are two potential stressors that many school counselors experience with regard to their multiple job tasks” (p. 56). Evans and Payne (2008)

suggested that school counsellors in numerous nations may have a role which is “characterized by considerable uncertainty and flux” (p. 318).

Williams and Wehrman (2010) stated that administrators sometimes may view counsellors as “administrative relief” (p. 112). In a study of 344 rural school principals, Bardhoshi and Duncan (2009) found that one of the five top school counsellor tasks included “assisting the school principal with identifying and resolving student issues, needs, and problems” (p. 22).

There is considerable literature about the role that school counsellors play as leaders within a school (see Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Bemak, 2000; Curry & DeVoss, 2009; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; House & Sears, 2002; Wingfield et al., 2010). Young, Dollarhide, and Baughman (2015) suggested that counsellor leadership is an important attribute in the principal-counsellor relationship. This is because some school administrators may practice a distributed leadership model (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). In a study that yielded 2,465 responses for leadership qualities of school counsellors, it was found that leadership attributes was one of the top five themes (Janson et al., 2009).

*School counsellors as mental health workers.* It has been suggested that there are far too many youth with mental health needs that have not been addressed (Bowers, Manion, Papadopoulos, & Gauvreau, 2013; DeKruyf et al., 2013). Mellin (2009) asserted that mental health issues impact youth at home and school, estimating that one in five children has a diagnosable mental disorder.

School counsellors and their administrators may differ on what the counsellor’s role is in addressing issues of student mental health (Brown, Dahlbeck, & Sparkman-

Barnes, 2006). About two decades ago, Lockhart and Keys (1998) stated, “Current conditions suggest that the time is ripe for ‘guidance’ counselors to redefine themselves as school ‘mental health’ counselors” (p. 4). Lockhart and Keys suggested that this transition should include specific attention to this new role: knowledge of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition (DSM-IV)* criteria, an understanding of “managed care” (p. 4), how to access services in the community for youth, knowledge of social services and youth justice systems, awareness of residential programs, and knowledge of how to intervene with mental health issues in school (p. 4).

Adolescents who manifest mental health issues may be more likely to access help at school rather than in the community (Burnett-Zeigler & Lyons, 2010); however, “In recent years school-based mental health intervention programs have played a key role in identifying youth with mental health needs and linking them to treatment” (p. 572). Mental health issues can keep children from thriving in school and in life (Waddell, 2007). Waddell (2007) stated that mental health issues are the foremost post-infancy health problems that Canadian children face. Flett and Hewitt (2013) claimed that mentally-distressed children or adolescents who wish to conceal their distress may express a “disguised depression” (p. 16) or a “smiling depression” (p. 16). These expressions are meant to hide serious mental health issues and may keep youth from entering into self-disclosure. The notion that students may conceal their mental health struggles is supported by Hartman et al. (2013) who spoke to both public stigma and youth self-stigma in relation to mental health. In a study of 254 high school students in Hamilton, Ontario, Hartman et al. found that twelve percent of high school youth identified a self-stigma as a dominant obstacle to reaching out for mental health

assistance. Waddell (2007) also spoke about a mental health stigma and claimed that because of this stigma, families may not seek the help their children need.

In a study whereby fifteen school respondents from three separate American high schools were surveyed, it was found that a possible stigma may explain why many students do not seek help. Bowers et al. (2013) suggested that one way to combat a mental health stigma may be “a commitment to mental health literacy across stakeholders” (p. 170), a notion also supported by Jones, Cook, and Wang (2011). Huggins et al. (2016) stated, “The term mental health is often misconstrued to mean mental illness when mental health should characterize health and well-being” (p. 22). In a study of 3,047 adults in Alberta who responded about personal depression, it was found that urban participants had a lower level of mental health stigma than did rural participants (Jones, Cook, & Wang, 2011).

School counsellors may work with youth who have anxiety and/or depression. An anxiety disorder can manifest itself in disabling and fearful symptoms that are frequent and intense (Keeley & Storch, 2009). Over-anxious youth may experience “cognitive distortions” (p. 27) and behavioural concerns such as avoidance. According to Rockhill et al. (2010) “Anxiety disorders are the most common and functionally impairing mental health disorder to occur in childhood and adolescence” (p. 66). Thompson, Robertson, Curtis, and Frick (2013) stated, “Excessive fear and worry that meets the clinical criteria for an anxiety disorder is experienced by 10-20% of the general population of children” (p. 223), a statistic which is also supported by the Canadian Mental Health Association (2016). Thompson et al. also suggested that untreated anxiety could result in higher levels of depression, suicide, or addictions among youth.

School counsellors may also work with youth who self-harm. In a study surveying 443 school counsellors, Roberts-Dobie and Donatelle (2007) found that eighty-one percent reported counselling students who self-harm. Adolescents who self-harm may do so deliberately (Best, 2006). It is noted by that students in middle years and high school may be particularly susceptible to issues of self-harm (Heath, Baxter, Toste, & McLouth, 2010).

Self-harm may usually be manifested as self-mutilation and, although these behaviours may not directly be associated with suicidal ideation, Ross and Heath (2002) noted, “anxiety and depression may function as precipitating factors” (p. 70). Youth may self-mutilate on the surface (Kaplan & Fik, 1977) in which they inflict carefully-placed injuries not requiring medical help, or they may harm themselves more deeply in proximity to vital bodily areas. Many self-mutilators may injure themselves with precision and ritual (Kaplan & Fik, 1977). Bennun (1984) noted that one explanation of why youth may harm themselves is “inward turned aggression” (p. 168).

School counsellors may intervene with students who have suicide ideation. Statistics Canada (2015b) revealed that, in 2012, 261 youth aged ten through nineteen successfully completed suicide, the highest youth suicide rate in the five years of reporting prior to 2012. The Canadian Mental Health Association (2016) stated that Canada has the third highest youth suicide rate of all industrialized countries. The World Health Organization (2016) reported that suicide was the “second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds globally in 2012” (para. 1). Many more youth attempt suicide or have suicide ideation than those who successfully complete the act. Identifying students who have suicide ideation is not straightforward. As Fineran (2012) noted,

While psychiatric disorders, including mood, anxiety, substance abuse, and PTSD, amongst others, are common among youths who attempt suicide, 40% of suicide completers under the age of 16 do not appear to have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder and may not be clearly distinguishable from their non-suicidal peers. (p. 15)

Christianson and Everall (2008) spoke about school counsellors being the “front-line school personnel” (p. 209) in dealing with student suicide. Their grounded theory study with school counsellors in Canada who had all lost a student to suicide found that counsellors did not feel they were “adequately prepared” (p. 213) for a post-suicide experience.

***Confidentiality guidelines.*** High school counsellors may experience tension as a result of upholding confidentiality guidelines. Confidentiality is “the cornerstone” (Williams & Wehrman, 2010, p. 110) or the “keystone” (Kaplan, 1995, p. 262) of a counsellor’s profession. It is accepted that school counsellors are challenged with “when and how to breach” (Moyer, Sullivan, & Growcock, 2012, p. 98) confidentiality often on a daily basis. Furthermore, the principal may see the school counsellor’s role in keeping student confidentiality as limiting necessary information to solve problems within the school (Kaplan, 1995). Kimber and Campbell (2014) likewise affirmed that the differing role expectations regarding student-counsellor confidentiality is contested ground. While it may be generally understood that counsellor-student confidentiality is not to be upheld for the serious issues of child abuse, suicide threats, or when other sorts of dangers are detected (Mitchell, Disque, & Robertson, 2002), other matters which are considered confidential may be obscure.

***Large class sizes.*** Counsellors may observe how large class sizes impact students. In 2014, one media outlet reported that in two Canadian prairie provinces class

sizes do not have limits (McElroy, 2014). The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) reported that class size directly impacts student inclusivity and learning (Froese-Germain, Riel, & McGahey, 2012). Smaller classes may result in more individualized attention from teachers and less time spent on off-task student behaviours (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011).

***School attendance concerns.*** Counsellors may also observe issues of student attendance. Davies and Lee (2006) stated that school attendance is “a significant agenda item” (p. 204) in the United Kingdom, Australia, United States, and Canada. In a study whereby thirteen high school students with poor attendance were interviewed, Davies and Lee found multiple reasons why some students do not attend school regularly. Among the reasons were issues of teachers' low expectations, bullying, difficulties with teachers, and peer pressure. They also stated that home and school communication may be poor.

***Socioeconomic disparity.*** Counsellors may notice socioeconomic disparity among the students. MacKinnon (2013) stated that, while Canada does not have a defined poverty line making poverty difficult to measure, “poverty continues to be persistent and pervasive” (p. 19). MacKinnon further noted that there appears to be no political will to place poverty as a significant item on the Canadian social landscape. Rothman (2007) estimated that almost one in six children live in poverty across Canada resulting in more health concerns, lower literacy, and lower skill levels. Furthermore, Statistics Canada (2015a) reported that, in 2007, “11% of population aged 5 to 24 in Canada lived in low-income circumstances” (para. 4). Children who live in poverty may experience a reduced likelihood of school success (Statistics Canada, 2015a).

*Counsellors' work with immigrant or refugee students.* High school counsellors in Canada may have specific experiences working with English as an Additional Language (EAL) students and immigrant or refugee students. As people are relocating globally and seeking resettlement, schools are tasked with helping newcomer children and youth to adjust (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Furthermore, immigrant students may reside alone or live with those other than their own families (Popadiuk, 2010) thereby making support for communication between parents and school counsellors problematic. Ironically, these students may require *more* social-emotional support than resident students. Popadiuk (2010) observed, “disconnections from others and ruptures in relationships significantly upset students and often led to feelings of depression, anxiety, and a sense of alienation” (p. 1525).

In some cases, families have been victims of “forced migration” (Stewart, 2014) because of political conflict in their home countries. Statistics Canada (2010) projects that by 2031, thirty-six percent of children, an over-representation of the Canadian population, under the age of fifteen will be a member of a visible minority group. Statistics Canada also projects that by 2031, of those who claim a non-Christian religion, one-half will be Muslim and about thirty-two percent of Canada’s population would have a first language other than English or French.

Stewart (2014) claimed, “School counsellors may be in a position to observe issues of inequity, misuse of power, and oppression” (p. 260). In speaking specifically about school counsellors serving a rapidly-expanding immigrant and refugee population in schools, Stewart claimed that school counsellors should have a social justice perspective. Because counsellors have a school-wide focus, they are positioned to

address school-wide inequities in relation to resettled youth. Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) claimed that, in Canadian schools, international students are often left out of discussions of matters that concern their welfare. They stated that school counsellors can begin to meet the needs of international students through addressing four areas: counselling for health promotion and prevention, accessible counselling, group interventions, and increasing their own multicultural competencies.

*High school counsellors' varied tasks.* Evans and Payne (2008) suggested that school counsellors in numerous nations may have a role which is “characterized by considerable uncertainty and flux” (p. 318). School counsellors may help students with a variety of tasks related to scholarships, post-secondary, or career applications. Through their assistance, counsellors’ roles includes a tremendous amount of paperwork. Kalkan and Demir (2015) stated that “paperwork and other non-counseling duties interfere with the role of school counselors” (p. 20).

Administrator perceptions about the school counsellor role resulted in the meta-theme of counsellor-to-administrator collaboration four times in this present study and has in the past received considerable attention in the school counselling discourse with varying conclusions. Coy (1999) suggested that principals may make assumptions about the school counsellor’s role based on previous experience. Kaplan (1995) remarked that principals and counsellors may view their roles differently which may open the door for tension and even conflict. Kimber and Campbell (2014) supported this notion saying that “tensions arise in part from a lack of understanding of the ethical principles that guide a counsellor’s actions” (p. 207). Their case study research involving eight principals and seven school counsellors in Australia determined that principals and counsellors have

differing paradigms concerning such issues as student drug usage and student-teacher conflict. Tensions or conflict regarding the differing perceptions of the counsellor's role may impact the counsellor's job satisfaction and even turnover rates (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). The principal-school counsellor relationship is, after all, a "superior-subordinate" (Clemens et al., 2009, p. 76) relationship.

Counsellors may communicate closely with parents or guardians of students. Auger (2006) suggested that communicating "troubling news" (p. 139) to parents is part of a school counsellor's daily tasks. Counsellors are front-line workers in informing parents about social or academic issues, substance abuse issues, and other serious issues such as suicide threats or self-harm. School counsellors may also put themselves in the receiving end of conflict that comes when parents are called about such matters: Auger remarked that often those who receive troublesome news may feel the news was conveyed badly. Furthermore, "tension and anxiety" (p. 142) can be a shared experience by both counsellor and parent that can be particularly "draining" (p. 144) for the counsellor. Additionally, knowing what to communicate to parents can be a professional "tightrope" (Mitchell, Disque, & Robertson, 2002, p. 156).

Hoyt (1984) suggested that parental influence may be greater than counsellor influence insofar as the career decisions of youth. In a Canadian study of how parents perceive their involvement in their children's career explorations, Levine and Sutherland (2013) found that while parents may not start career-focused discussions with their children, they respond positively when their children initiate career discussions.

Giles (2005) described three different types of parent-educator relationships (p. 228): the deficit narrative, the *in loco parentis* narrative, and the relational narrative.

Giles suggested that some educators see parents who are from lower incomes as either being deprived or having low expectations for their children. The Latin phrase *in loco parentis* or *in the place of a parent* came about in court cases in the United States around the start of the twentieth century whereby it was argued that educators had a right to discipline students as a parent might. Such principles as search and seizure and other school rules were born of this paradigm (Giles, 2005). Giles stated, “Another way of characterizing the *in loco parentis* narrative is that educators have high expectations for students but limited or low expectations for their parents” (p. 231). The relational narrative assumes that educators wish to “work *with* parents rather than *for* them” (p. 232). The relational narrative holds that parents are equal partners in education and that the relationship is exemplified by frequent parental-educator conversations and collaborative understandings. Giles claimed that school counsellors are positioned to develop a school-wide relational narrative with parents which would nurture the academic and social-emotional growth of students.

Research supports the above claim. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) summarized two studies of collaborative school and family or community partnerships and determined, “When educators communicated effectively with families and involved them in activities focused on student behavior, schools reported fewer disciplinary actions from one year to the next” (p. 3). The theoretical foundation for Epstein and Van Voorhis’s study was Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1987). This theoretical model proposed that home, school, and community supports overlap to provide positive interactions and therefore good results for children.

***Student resilience.*** High school counsellors may observe the resilience of students. There is a wealth of international academic literature which speaks about youth resilience (see Gallagher, Starkman, & Rhoades, 2016; Ghimbulut & Opre, 2013; Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver, 2012; Ulturgasheva, Rasmus, & Morrow, 2015). Gallagher, Starkman, and Rhoades (2016), researchers in Canada, used applied theatre to investigate youth homelessness in large cities. They concluded that “creative resilience” (p. 15), in their study as expressed through drama, may take the place of more traditional resilience theories. In Romania, Ghimbulut and Opre (2013) developed a Youth Resilience Measure (YRM) (p. 313) which was used to determine the “protective factors” (p. 313) that youth might engage in order to be resilient. Libenberg, Unger, and Van de Vijver (2011), researchers in both Canada and the Netherlands, used the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28) to survey 497 youth in Atlantic Canada about how they access multiple-service supports and therefore demonstrate resiliency. In the circumpolar regions of the Arctic, British and American researchers Ulturgasheva, Rasmus, and Morrow (2015) studied how Indigenous youth resiliency may be expressed through collaborative strategies across different Arctic regions. These and other scholars as well as the participant’s experience as noted above may demonstrate that youth resilience is of considerable interest to researchers as well as school counsellors.

### **Summary**

Through this review of the literature, it has been established that the high school counselling profession has a rich history shared by both Canada and the United States. Starting in the vocational education movement, high school counselling progressed throughout the decades and now may include advocacy practices; however, Schaeffer’s

(2008) research noted, “School counsellor advocacy in practice is not thoroughly understood” (p. 4). Moreover, there may be counsellor, institutional, or student resistance to the advocacy role.

The role of the high school counsellor has evolved; however, the role of the contemporary high school counsellor may include vast and ambiguous characteristics. Burnham and Jackson (2000) claimed the role of the school counsellor is difficult to define, interpret, and implement. Furthermore, implicit in this research is the paradigmatic assumption that school counsellors function in the workplace with confidentiality restrictions and therefore their practice is not well-known to those outside of the profession. This study’s collected data may therefore provide an “ontological authenticity” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252) of the work of practicing school counsellors.

Chapter Three, *Research Methodology*, will provide an overview of the study’s design and research method. This includes the research questions, design and procedures, overview of how case study methods of inquiry are used in research, and the conceptual underpinnings for this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Research Methodology**

This study was driven by the epistemological assumption that knowledge is both individually and socially constructed and that multiple meanings can be attributed within any one context. A collective case study methodology was used to “discover and document” (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 60) the phenomena of how high school counsellors perceive their role.

#### **Conceptual Frameworks**

This study’s design, reporting, and analysis drew from three conceptual frameworks: interpretivist inquiry, Durkheim’s structural functional approach, and principles of grounded theory. These conceptual frameworks are now explained more fully.

Case study researchers may approach their studies with paradigmatic presuppositions. The first paradigmatic epistemological framework that underpinned this research was an interpretivist inquiry which suggests that real-life phenomena have multiple meanings and complexities (Wignall, 1998) which are subject to interpretation. Real-life phenomena are typified by obscurity and often dilemma; the interpretivist researcher is interested in how participants experience obscure and even conflictual phenomena and the meanings they attach to their experiences. An interpretivist researcher acknowledges alternate paradigms as experienced by participants who contribute data from real-world experiences (Cresswell, 1994).

I entered this research with an interpretivist theoretical framework that placed my own interpretation at the centre of this study. This interpretivist focus has guided how

data were collected and analyzed. From a researcher's paradigm, an interpretive theoretical framework attends to the epistemology and ontology of the study as well as the methodology used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

For this research, an interpretivist theoretical framework provided a paradigm through which data were analyzed. Anderson and Barrera (1995) claimed, "Although the subjective view accepts that there are objects and behaviors external to the individual, it insists that they have no meaning in isolation from human perception" (p. 143).

Likewise, Henstrand (2006) asserted that the only reality that I can assume is embedded within my own interpretation. My "interpretive activity" (Ferguson, 1993, p. 36) of the participants' narratives in this study, gained through transcribed interviews and participant verification, was embedded in the further analytic activity of thematic coding which is explored in detail further in this chapter.

Kovach (2009) suggested, "Interpretive meaning-making involves a subjective accounting of social phenomena as a way of giving insight" (p. 130). My own subjective experience about the role of high school counsellors therefore provided an interpretive approach through which to analyze data specifically during the analytical activity of coding and theming.

Seidman (2013) stated that research is interested in the stories of others and that language is often the vehicle used to understand human experience. This research therefore was designed to collect the stories and language of high school counsellors in their own words and from their own experiences about how they perceived their role. Drawing from Indigenous research methodologies, Kovach (2009) said that, "knowledge and story are inseparable and that interpretive knowing is highly valued, that story is

purposeful” (p. 98). The stories the participants told during the field research are invaluable insofar as their contribution to new insights and perspectives into the lived experiences of high school counsellors.

The second conceptual framework drew from Durkheim’s concept of structural functionalism, or how social structures function (Quantz, 1999). Structural functionalism is a “heuristic device” (Chilcott, 1988, p. 103) used in social science research to analyze data from a conceptual framework which is absent of a theory. It maintains that individuals are interconnected with their environments and is concerned with the function of social structures (Henstrand, 2006). Durkheim was an anthropologist and sociologist (Pope, 1975) who suggested that established structures should be questioned (Madan, 2010). He also suggested that moral education should not be contained in religious structures only, that secular institutions should also be places of moral systems (Madan, 2010). His philosophy was in harmony with others who, at the time of late 19th century and early 20th century industrialization, pathologized the social problems brought on by an industrial society.

Durkheim also maintained that ritual is a prominent component in social structures (Quantz, 1999). Schools, as social structures, are places of ritual. The Durkheimian thought would be that ritual “contributes to feelings of social solidarity” (Quantz, 1999, p. 496) and is exercised to “maintain the social order” (p. 496) and the status quo. Those who are players in the social structure enact the performance of the ritual and therefore help to uphold the status quo (Quantz, 1999).

This study was also informed by five principles of grounded theory: The first principle was that I engaged with my collected data by using a “constant comparative

analysis” (Dunne, 2011, p. 111) which rendered the line between data collection and data analysis obscure (Corbin, 2017; Suddaby, 2006); analysis began the moment data were collected and continued throughout the transcription and coding process. Codes were used to sort through the tremendous amount of data I obtained. Once completed, my interpretation of the coding system generated the themes which are explored in Chapter Five, *Data Analysis, Discussion, and Implications*.

Second, rather than establish an objective truth from the data, I was more interested in how research participants perceived and interpreted their reality, another principle of grounded theory (Suddaby, 2006). The third contribution of grounded theory to this research was that I drew thematic conclusions from the data rather than entering the research with theoretical assumptions (Dunne, 2011). Fourth, I borrowed from grounded theory in the conceptualization of a literature review: Rather than seal a literature review as complete prior to obtaining the field research, the literature review was amended and adapted as I entered the analytical phase (see Dunne, 2011). Heath (2006) stated that the literature review might even be considered to be data. For my study, my own researcher reflexive approach (El Hussein, Kennedy, & Oliver, 2017), evident in the literature review, was a critical step in providing relevant meaning to what the research participants contributed. This means that I explicitly influenced the literature review by adding relevant knowledge based on what I learned in the field research (Gentles, Jack, Nicholas, & McKibbin, 2014). Finally, I do not claim neutrality in my presence as a researcher and school counsellor practitioner in this study (Ramalho, Adams, Huggard, & Hoare, 2015), another contribution of grounded theory. I have

critically examined the existing literature and have included my own challenges and tensions throughout the study.

According to Charmaz (2010), “Grounded theory offers a set of flexible strategies, not rigid prescriptions” (p. 185) for data discovery. Rather than starting with a theory as some research may, grounded theory *derives* a theory from data collection (Corbin, 2017). The contribution of this research rests on the emerging thematic typology that the current role of high school counsellors is embedded in tension; under this typology are succinct *themes* based on participants’ interview narratives (see Popadiuk, 2010). These themes contribute to a better understanding of the assumptions, discourse, and lived reality of high school counselling.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perceptions of a cohort of high school counsellors in Canada about their role. The questions posed to counsellor-participants were:

Question 1: Tell me about your background and experience.

Question 2: Please describe the school in which you work.

Question 3: Describe your role and responsibilities<sup>1</sup>.

Question 4: Option 1 (if participants have already referred to an example of advocacy: You have talked about situations in which you seem to be advocating for a student. Can you please expand on that aspect of your role? or, Option 2 (if participants have not yet included an example of advocacy): Are there times when you feel you have served as an advocate for a student? Tell me about those times.

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<sup>1</sup> The findings of this research speak to how high school counsellors perceived their role; that they were asked about their responsibilities contributes to more fully understanding of how they perceived their role.

Question 5: What challenges or risks do you encounter in your practice?

Additionally, each participant may have been asked to respond in a more detailed way with specific prompts.

### **Research Design and Procedures**

A collective case study provided the design for data collection and analysis for this study. While a cumulative case study builds on existing studies and a collaborative case study allows participants who share a professional community and purpose to generate data in conjunction with one another, a collective case study can produce data from individual research participants (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Schram, 2006) who each represent a single case which in this study is a cohort of school counsellors representing different schools and school districts. This study engendered a greater understanding of unique phenomena (Schram, 2006), in this case how high school counsellors perceived their roles, and contributes new knowledge through the participants' contextual narratives (Stake, 2005). Case study research responds to *how* and *why* research questions (Leonard-Barton, 1990; Yin, 2014); thus, the question *how do high school counsellors perceive their role?* was the scope of this research.

**Research design: Case study research in education.** Case study research is not as much a research methodology as it is an analytic method to discover what can be learned about a specific case that is observed in-depth (Schram, 2006). Ashley (2012) stated that case study is a design for research and Stake (2005) claimed case study research is both a process and product of inquiry.

Case study design is relevant in the social sciences because it allows for an examination and description of a situation or experience that may not otherwise be visible

to researchers (Yin, 2014). Because case studies allow a researcher to view and interpret (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007) phenomena from multiple realities (Brown, 2008), this study drew upon the “personal professional insight” (Stenhouse, 1979, p. 6) of how twelve high school counsellors perceived their role. While the epistemological inquiry at the root of case study design is *what can be learned from a single case?* (Stake, 2005), the use of multiple participants in this study resulted in richer data collection, reporting, and interpretation and therefore contributes new scholarship.

Case study research methods have been used extensively in educational settings since the 1970s because this methodology offers an alternative to the positivist method of research that may not be as well-equipped to obtain insight into real-world experiences (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Case study research in education advances new knowledge on and in familiar settings by illuminating that which is either hidden or unfamiliar (Elliott & Lukeš, 2008). Case study research has the capacity to capture the rich and complex interactions between a specific individual (the case) and the environment surrounding the individual. Flyvbjerg (2006) stated that, “Case knowledge is central to human learning” (p. 222); therefore, case studies hold a legitimate place in research design.

Some have criticized the case study methodology because of an unclear consensus about how to conduct case studies (Brown, 2008; Meyer, 2001). Meyer (2001) claimed there are no particular requirements of using a case study strategy. She further claimed this is a strength as well as a weakness. It is a strength because the design decisions rest with the researcher and a weakness because poor quality case studies may result because stricter boundaries delineating case studies do not exist.

***Defining the case.*** This research involved twelve participants and each participant was defined as an individual case (Yin, 2014); thus, this case study was a collective case study (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013).

***Bounding the case.*** In case study research, *bounding the case* refers to the researcher's design of who is included as research participants versus who is not included (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). For this research, high school counsellors were the bounded unit and the school systems in which they worked were the context for the research.

***Trustworthiness.*** As in other forms of research, "standards of quality" (Morrow, 2005, p. 250) must be considered when conducting qualitative research. These standards are necessary for the trustworthiness of a study and may be generally viewed as validity and reliability; however, in qualitative research, these standards may also be addressed through attending to issues of credibility (Morrow, 2005). Credibility "can be achieved by prolonged engagement with participants; persistent observation in the field...researcher reflexivity; and participant checks" (p. 252). While this study's interviews may not qualify as prolonged engagement, researcher reflexivity and participant checks (participants viewed and validated their interview responses) were key components of this study's design.

***Research procedures.*** The following section describes the process used for recruiting counsellor-participants and ensuring the confidentiality of participant identity and narrative data. It also discusses how data were collected, reduced, and arranged into coded units.

*Participants.* This research invited twelve participants who were practicing high school counsellors to participate in one interview. After ethics approval was received from the University of Regina's Research Ethics Board in the form of an ethics certificate on February 24, 2016 (Appendix A), I worked with the university's field development office to contact two school divisions' senior administrators about conducting my research in their school divisions. This measure follows an agreement protocol between these two specific school divisions and the university. Once permission was granted from the school divisions, I contacted the chairpersons for the two high school counsellors' groups to explain my research at a regularly-scheduled counsellor meeting. Because participant response was slower than expected after I addressed the first group of counsellors, I also contacted high school counsellors from another school division where no university protocol existed to ask them to participate in this study. This was agreed upon in a meeting between my doctoral supervisors and I.

Through regularly-scheduled school counsellor meetings or individually, I presented the high school counsellors with information about the research and the nature of the research questions in the document *Information for Prospective Research Participants* (Appendix B). Counsellors then had the opportunity to participate in the research by contacting me directly by emailing me at my personal email address or by phone text. Allowing participants to express interest in private was an initial step towards ensuring participant confidentiality.

Twelve volunteer counsellors agreed to participate in this study; given that there were twelve, I anticipated collecting a large amount of interview data. Participants were

neither compensated in any way for their involvement in this study nor was I provided any funding for this research.

Through the document *Information for Prospective Research Participants* (Appendix B), participating counsellors were assured that they would be sent an electronic copy of the summary of results or dissertation should they request it.

*Participant confidentiality.* Protecting participant confidentiality is an essential part of ethical research. The participants for this study were assured that no one other than me would have access to interview audiotapes and that data would be locked in a secure location until the completion of the research project and for a period of five years following which is a requirement of the University of Regina Ethics Board. Interview audiotapes and transcripts were therefore stored in a password-protected home computer.

I enacted every measure possible throughout the research process to ensure participant confidentiality; however, the nature of qualitative research limits confidentiality through specific incidents shared or peculiar linguistic nuances or information known. Because there were only two male participants, non-gendered specific pseudonyms were provided for each research participant in the reporting of data so as to not identify them. The narrative form of data documentation in reporting the findings did not include any details that would assist the reader in identifying a specific counsellor.

*Demographic information about the participants.* Prior to collecting data about how the participants perceived their role, demographic and school information were acquired. All participants held bachelor of education degrees and eight of twelve held master of education degrees; one participant noted the master of education degree was in

progress. All participants started their careers in education through teaching specific subjects: math, fine arts, science, business, social studies, and French were the combined subjects taught by participants in this study.

Participants demonstrated they were from a variety of ages, experience, and career stages. A few participants were new to the profession having only been working a few years while others were in the midst of their careers. One was nearing retirement and had worked as a counsellor for decades. The widespread career stage of this participant pool added depth to the findings. Ten participants identified as female, White, and Canadian. Two identified as male and Canadian. There are limitations with this seemingly heterogeneous group because it does not reflect the diversity of students in our school divisions today.

*About the schools in which the counsellors worked.* Participants described their schools as being grades nine through twelve high schools; however, a rural participant worked in a kindergarten through grade twelve school and another spoke about a grade seven through twelve school. Many participants' schools were described as having a diverse student population and having English as an Additional Language (EAL) support. Some participants spoke about their schools having Indigenous students. Responses about school size and demographics indicate that small, medium, and larger-sized schools with a range of socioeconomically diverse student populations were represented by the interviewees.

The rural counsellors who participated in this study said social workers have the responsibility of social-emotional counselling in their school division. The remaining eight participants, all urban school counsellors, said their roles included social-emotional,

personal, and post-secondary or career student support in addition to other duties. This overriding incongruence between the rural and urban counsellors' roles did not have a salient impact on the reporting and analyses of findings.

Of interest to me were the data regarding counsellor to student ratios: Many counsellors indicated their counsellor-to-student ratio was one counsellor to five hundred students. While others indicated fewer students in their schools, the data showed that, for this cohort of participants, each counsellor was responsible for hundreds of students.

Most counsellors remarked about the positive environment of their schools and a friendly or helpful teaching staff; however, participants also spoke about challenges within their schools. Such challenges included students who are reluctant to take available opportunities, large class sizes, gender stereotyping insofar as career decisions, or schools that were not inclusive of all students. A rural participant spoke of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students as being marginalized saying, "some students that wish for more comradery that maybe they can't find in a smaller school setting." That not all students received the support they need was a common notion among some counsellors and some attributed the lack of support to provincial funding shortfalls.

One counsellor spoke about a school's challenge in that a food donation goes to more affluent students instead of poorer students. It was also mentioned that students over the age of sixteen are discontinued if they have twenty or more absences. It was clear to me that this counsellor was uncomfortable with the removal policy and had empathy for the more vulnerable students who were asked to leave school for reasons of non-attendance.

The third section of the interview asked counsellors to talk about how they perceive their role, their advocacy work for or with students, and the challenges or risks they face in their role. The findings from the collected interview data were analyzed by being reduced and coded and are represented in Chapter Four, *Findings and Presentation of the Data*.

**Data collection: Interviews.** Individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this study. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) referred to the concept of interviews as a “social practice” (p. 521). Interviews in qualitative research are concerned with *what* and *how* a subject is talked about (Josselson, 2013) from participants’ realities. Interviewing seeks to understand the experience of others and to make meaning through language of that experience (Seidman, 2013).

Twelve high school counsellors from two urban and one rural Canadian prairie school divisions were interviewed between March 30, 2016, and May 26, 2016. Although it was predicted in the research proposal that each interview might last about ninety minutes, no interview did span this length of time. The duration of each interview lasted from twenty-six minutes to one hour, seven minutes, for a total of nine hours, ten minutes of recorded data. The interviews provided the field research data for this study.

Interviews took place at mutually-agreed upon locations: One interview occurred in a private room at a public library branch, two occurred in a private room at a university library, two took place in a restaurant, and the remaining seven participants were interviewed in neighbourhood coffee shops. In each instance of the public locations, secluded tables were chosen by both the participant and me. Prior to each interview, participants signed the *Informed Consent* waiver (Appendix C). The signed copy was left

with me and each participant received an additional copy for her or his records. The *Interview Guide* (Appendix D) led participants through a semi-structured interview and the interview conversations were audiotaped by me (Yin, 2014) using a Sony micro audio-recorder.

A good interview is determined by the ability of the interviewer to follow up with additional questions and how the interviewer verifies her own understandings during the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The questions were presented to participants like “guided conversations rather than structured queries” (Yin, 2014, p. 110). While the principle interview questions were brief and open, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggested that the researcher should see herself as her own “research tool” (p. 160) which means that I could have prompted additional interaction between myself and the research participants. Impromptu questioning, however, occurred seldom because all participants appeared to understand the initial questions and speak to them without further assistance. A “quality interview” (p. 192) is one where “rich, specific, and relevant” (p. 192) data are gained from participants by the shortest interviewer questions and the longest participant responses. Participants spoke freely and provided thorough responses with little interviewer input. The interview questions used a relational approach and were designed to bring about details, personal stories, and elaboration (Josselson, 2013). Yin (2014) suggested that a case study researcher should be open to discoveries that occur as a result of data collection. As the findings showed, new discoveries were salient in each recorded interview.

As I proceeded from the initial demographic interview questions towards questions about counsellor roles, responses became more complex based on participants’

interpretations of the question as well as their own lived experiences (Wilson, 2015). Longer, multi-topic responses began to emerge more consistently. This complexity is presented with thick description in the next chapter, Chapter Four, *Findings and Presentation of the Data*.

**Data collection: Job descriptions.** Letters were sent to each of the three corresponding school divisions from which research participants were drawn asking for job descriptions pertaining to the work school counsellors do (see Appendix E). Only one school division stated they have a written job description which outlines the expectations of the high school counsellor's role. It is not included in its entirety in the reporting of data because it would easily identify the school division for which it was created; however, it was referred to in the analysis of data specifically for its notation on confidentiality guidelines for which school counsellors must uphold.

**Data transcription.** I transcribed each interview myself by slowing the audio files to one-third of their original speed. The listening of each audio file was a strictly private activity because I used headphones to listen to and transcribe the interviews. Each transcribed interview was then emailed to individual participants with the request to verify that the transcription represented an accurate account of the interview. Participants responded back to me and then I asked participants to sign a *Transcript Release* form (Appendix C) which was contained in the same document as the *Informed Consent*. This documented that each participant agreed to release their transcript to me for this research. I assured the participants that no transcript would be displayed in its entirety for this study; this was a measure to protect the identity of participants. All participants consented to the release of their transcripts.

At the onset of data collection and throughout the research process, participants were asked to share only the information that they were comfortable with sharing.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

During data analysis, the participants' individual interview narratives were reduced from over 81,000 collective words to approximately 19,300 words and displayed in a matrix (Johansson et al., 2015; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Thompson, Lyons, & Timmons, 2015).

**The reduction and coding of data.** Case study researchers are interested in themes that are common in multiple cases. Topics and themes can be generated through descriptive or interpretive coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Borrowing from the notions of grounded theory, case study researchers may employ an analytical framework which constantly compares the data from different cases and may therefore contribute to theoretical discovery (Manconi, 2003). Rather than a theoretical discovery, this study's data are analyzed and conveyed as emerging themes.

The data contained in this study were represented, interpreted, and analyzed borrowing from a coding system known as a "meta-analysis" (Stall-Meadows & Hyle, 2010, p. 413). Use of a meta-analysis assists researchers to "review, assimilate, and compare large amounts of existing data from multiple studies" (p. 413). The meta-analysis includes the tripartite coding system of *open*, *axial*, and *selective* coding as described by Stall-Meadows and Hyle (2010, pp. 414-416) who cited the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990, pp. 423-424). Open coding involves the "fracturing" (Stall-Meadows & Hale, 2010, p. 415) of data. Axial coding reconfigures and represents the data "in a new way" (p. 415). Finally, selective coding is used for emerging thematic perspectives.

Using the meta-analytical approach, I displayed data using a five-column matrix; to illustrate, a small section of the matrix is indicated in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1

*An illustrative sample of the matrix used for data analysis.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Reduction</b>	<b>Axial codes</b>	<b>Thematic codes</b>
5	"I dealt with that...because my principal wasn't there today so there was an acting principal who hadn't done it before...we had to check their lockers, check their bags, check their persons, make sure they didn't bring drugs into the school."	I dealt with that, because my principal wasn't there.	Serve as administrators.	Acting administration.
12	"I do the acting admin role quite a bit...I'm easy to cover off and I have a really good general student population understanding."	Acting admin role, general student population understanding.	Serve as administrators because of school-wide knowledge.	Acting administration.
4	"Well I get into my office in the morning and there's at least four kids hanging out waiting..."	At least four kids waiting.	Many students want to see the counsellor at the same time.	A sense of being overwhelmed.
5	"...I had three appointments, triple-booked and they were all waiting to see me plus ten others standing in line and we had a situation in the office..."	Three appointments, triple-booked, plus ten others, situation in the office.	Many demands on counsellors at once.	A sense of being overwhelmed.
7	"...from the minute I drive up to the building, it can start in the parking lot, and it's go..."	From the minute I drive up.	Many demands on counsellors at once.	A sense of being overwhelmed.
2	"I'm usually there at 7:30...there's a lot of (students with exceptional needs) who come early to school and then they want to come in and talk to me."	I'm usually there at 7:30.	Arriving early to see students.	Long hours.

Participants were represented by assigned numbers in the first column; these assigned numbers were later given assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms. The second column contained participants' interview narratives. The third column, open coding, contained the fracturing (or reduction) of data. The fourth column, axial coding, represented the

data in new ways. This led to the fifth column, the development of codes. These codes were then used to represent topics which, in the analysis phase, were interpreted into themes. The coded topics are explored in Chapter Four, *Findings and Presentation of the Data*, and the topics, emerged into themes, are analyzed and discussed in Chapter Five, *Data Analysis, Discussion, and Implications*.

At the conclusion of the data coding exercise and continuing in the analytical phase, I was interested in the frequency of codes because code frequencies informed how I ranked the codes and therefore used them to inform thematic discoveries. Paying attention to coding frequencies also was a measure of trustworthiness in the actual case data I was reporting and not simply verifying my own researcher bias (Manconi, 2003).

Yin (1999) suggested that cases studies “tolerate the condition whereby the boundary between a phenomenon and its context is not clear” (p. 1211). This assertion may be true of the data presentation that follows in Chapter Four, *Findings and Presentation of the Data*. The phenomena of the roles of practicing high school counsellors are fluid and not easily categorized. My task as researcher therefore became a continuing analysis of documenting participant narratives to interpret and code data. The complex data-reporting task involved classifying participant narratives into coded categories; however, I found that many participant comments blurred and blended such categorization. This may be indicative of the multi-faceted role of high school counsellors whose perceptions about their role are neither linear nor straightforward.

In reporting of these collective case studies data, I neither identify the gender of the participants nor identify participants in any other way except to occasionally say if the participants were rural participants or urban participants. Because the rural participants

who participated in this study were career counsellors and the urban participants were social-emotional, personal, and career counsellors, some of the data is reported in a rural or urban context to reflect counsellor roles accurately.

**Analysis and discussion of data.** In the final chapter, data are analyzed and discussed using conceptual typologies (Thomson & Palermo, 2014) which are created based on my interpretation of the interview coded data. This analytic strategy uses typologies as overarching concepts to interpret and understand participant narrative data. The use of typologies within this collective case study informs the findings because they synthesize the coded topics which emerge into thematic units. Typologies help to clarify data results.

### **My Role as Researcher**

Throughout the entire process of recruiting participants, collecting interview data, and verifying data with respondents, I was concerned about the “relational ethics” (C. Ellis, 2007, p. 3) of this study. C. Ellis (2007) stated, “Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched” (p. 4). I had a shared professional identity with the research participants because I was a colleague of participants. This shared identity had to be protected, not exploited. Some counsellors who were interviewed I would consider good acquaintances; others I met for the first time while conducting this research. In this way, I would consider myself as “both insider and outsider” (Kovach, 2009, p. 51) in my relationship with research participants for this study.

To respect the counsellor-participants’ autonomy, I was prudent about meeting participants for the interview at their desired time and in their desired locations. I

attended to the participants by progressing through the interview questions in a way that put my own experiences and thoughts on hold. I enacted every measure of the process of respondent interview and interview transcript verification respectively and cautiously.

### **Summary**

Twelve Canadian prairie high school counsellors were interviewed for this study. The interviews were audiotaped and interview data were transcribed, reduced, and coded using a meta-analytical process as suggested for case study research by Stall-Meadows and Hyle (2010). This process led to the formation of thematic findings and thus contributes to existing research and provides new scholarship about how high school counsellors perceived their role.

The next chapter, Chapter Four, *Findings and Presentation of the Data*, offers a presentation of the findings. Chapter Five analyzes and discusses the findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings and Presentation of the Data

In this chapter, I present findings about how high school counsellors perceived their role. The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with counsellor-participants, each representing a single case. Based on the meta-analytic coding method for cross-case analysis (open, axial, and selective coding as described in Chapter Three, *Methodology*), the findings are presented using coded topics, which are interpreted as themes in the next chapter, rather than a case-to-case format. This deliberate measure represents what I value in the knowledge coming from the findings of this study (Harland, 2014): Rather than conceptualizing the data using a case-to-case perspective, the contribution of this research rests in the emerging themes, representing the findings, from the collection of cases. The topics and themes are analyzed and further discussed in Chapter Five, *Data Analysis, Discussion, and Implications* whereby complex, interconnected, and competing tensions inherent in the themes are explored.

Gender-neutral pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant for the reporting of these data. The data are presented using counsellor-participants' verbatim narratives as a precaution so as to inform the findings without misrepresentation. Prior to reporting the topics which emerged from the data, a case profile is provided for each counsellor who participated in this study.

#### Case Profiles

Each high school counsellor who volunteered to be a participant for this research worked within unique school environments and displayed diverse interests and strengths. As the data collection progressed from one interview to the next, the counsellors'

distinctive personalities and approach to their role brought life to their narratives. As a group, these profiles are comprised of two males and ten females who represent four rural and eight urban school settings.

**Sandy<sup>2</sup>.** As an urban counsellor, Sandy's interests included teaching self-help and self-advocacy skills to students to lower their dependence upon the school counsellor and increase their independent life skills. Sandy was also passionate about mental health education and was a driving force in helping the school staff become aware and knowledgeable about adolescent mental health issues.

**Terry.** Terry, also an urban counsellor, exhibited a profound sense of social justice that permeated throughout her narrative responses. Terry revealed a commitment to critical pedagogy and spoke passionately about issues such as student socio-economic imbalances and privilege.

**Chris.** Chris, an urban counsellor, brought to the counselling position a variety of skills gained through decades of different careers working with youth in other Canadian regions. Chris conveyed thoughtful reflections about the demands on high school counsellors.

**Jamie.** Jamie worked in an urban school where it was expected that the counsellor also has teaching responsibilities. As a result, Jamie contributed reflections about the strains and demands placed on the role of a counsellor who also has been scheduled to teach daily.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the reporting of findings to protect participant identity.

**Dallas.** Dallas was a lone counsellor in an urban high school. Dallas was forthright about articulating the disconnect in trying to be all things to all people such as supporting an entire school's student and staff population after a student's suicide.

**Taylor.** Taylor was a rural counsellor who worked in a kindergarten through grade twelve school although the role consisted of providing career counselling only to the grades nine through twelve students.

**Morgan.** As an urban high school counsellor for about twenty years, Morgan was articulate about how the role had changed since first receiving the position. Morgan was a proponent of teaching self-advocacy skills to students and challenged pre-conceived paradigms about students.

**Jordan.** Jordan was a rural career counsellor who worked on an itinerant basis. Jordan spoke about doing whatever was necessary to secure funding for Indigenous students to proceed to secondary education.

**Hunter.** An urban counsellor, Hunter spoke passionately about working with students from a diverse cultural spectrum. Hunter also was aware of how family systems impact student success in school.

**Harper.** A rural itinerant career counsellor, Harper was an experienced counsellor who reflected on how the role of counsellor had changed, specifically about the amount of documentation that is now expected of the role.

**Kelly.** Kelly worked at an urban school and offered a unique perspective about the physical danger that high school counsellors might encounter. Kelly also shared comments about the role of counsellor who has also been assigned part-time teaching duties.

**Dana.** Dana was a rural career counsellor who spoke about the demands that are sometimes placed upon counsellors to serve as acting administrators. Dana also shared a perspective related to the social-emotional assistance that career counsellors may offer students although that aspect of their role may not be acknowledged.

In reporting these data, there are contributions by all counsellor-participants. My task in organizing the data was to discern which components of the combined narratives would best inform the findings. Some participants' interview comments are therefore used extensively while others less frequently.

### **Counsellors' Perceived Roles: Eleven Topics**

The next section about school counsellor roles is reported topically drawing from a cross-case meta-analytical tool, data coding. DeKruyf et al. (2013) stated, "As the profession of school counseling continues to evolve, the professional identity of school counselors may shift with it" (p. 278). How high school counsellors perceived their roles was explored through this research and contributes to the scholarship on how the profession is evolving.

Eleven topics about the role of high school counsellor emerged from the data collected from counsellor-participants. The topic of *advocacy practices* is presented first because I asked participants specifically about their advocacy work for and with students. As a result, a significant amount of data were collected which addressed advocacy specifically. The remaining topics are then presented in order of coding frequencies.

They are:

1. Advocacy practices;

2. Role ambiguity<sup>3</sup>;
3. Being overwhelmed;
4. Student support<sup>4</sup>;
5. Student mental health;
6. Parental communication;
7. Unpredictable days;
8. Collaboration;
9. Staff support;
10. Crisis; and,
11. Self-care

These eleven topics will now be presented.

**Advocacy practices.** Various responses related to how counsellors advocate for or with students were shared. Hunter described advocacy work as a “primary role” of counsellors and that the role involves understanding issues from the student’s viewpoint. Several counsellors said that the job of a high school counsellor *is* to be an advocate.

Chris said:

But in any form or way that’s we all do in guidance is to serve the needs of that student and to get them back into the classroom or back on track or to help them to be successful in their learning so that they can go on to do the things that they want to do in life.

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<sup>3</sup> The word *ambiguity* is used in the presentation of these findings as a topical code to describe counsellors’ uncertainty and, at times, tension in regards to their role. How their narratives contribute to the overarching concept of tension inherent in counsellors’ roles is explored and discussed in Chapter Five, *Data Analysis, Discussion, and Implications*.

<sup>4</sup> All eleven topics will be discussed in the next chapter; however, the topic of student support (which appeared fourth highest in data coding frequency) will be analyzed separately because of its categorization in a typology dissimilar to the other ten topics.

Jamie said the role of counsellor and advocate is synonymous: “If you describe *what is a guidance counsellor?* I would say that it is a one-word description: student advocate.

You do whatever you need to do to help that student.” Dana described the counsellor’s advocacy role in this way:

Advocacy is such a broad word, I mean lots of times you’ll talk to teachers about kids’ marks and how they’re doing in class and that kind of thing, and that’s being an advocate for the kid because the kid won’t speak for themselves because they’re a little bit nervous, and there’s lots of that, lots of that kind of thing. You’ll often do it with other authority figures like principals and vice-principals and parents for kids as well as teachers. And then there’s the kids who are in crisis and just don’t know how to make a decision on what they should do....I would say advocating for or with a student is highlighting, advertising, and believing in a student and conveying that or explaining or sharing that with someone else or helping them to learn how to do it for themselves.

It is clear through these findings that counsellors who support students through advocacy do so in a multitude of complex ways. Hunter said:

I think being an advocate means accessing programs sometimes, it means talking to people so they can think about the kids and about the situations differently. It means personally putting time and energy into kids in a lot of unconventional ways. Sometimes as a guidance counsellor I’m scribing exams and doing adaptations and asking kids what they need and seeing why they’re not succeeding in school. Sometimes I’m counselling, sometimes I’m learning from them about their culture or their way of seeing the world. Sometimes I’m helping them gain contact with other community agencies so bridging.... And so advocating for teachers and with the kids and advocating for the kids with the teachers and the school and admin, talking to the attendance committee about kids’ lives so that why they’ve missed twenty classes in their English isn’t a good reason to throw them out of school in that class. Advocating with parents so that they can access services because they don’t know what questions to ask the school division to access a variety of programs that we have....And then there’s advocating when school policies don’t function in their intended ways but function in unintended ways which hurts students, so then there’s reflecting back to the institution some of the behaviours that the institution itself is having because of the way it does business. So there’s also advocating in meetings and with the institution itself to change the rules to change the boundaries, to adapt to the differences in what the community needs over time.

*Advocating for students to be successful in school.* Varied responses were shared that illustrated how counsellors advocate to support students for student success.

Numerous counsellors spoke about being an advocate for students with teachers. Jamie gave this experience:

I get kids coming in upset because they got kicked out of four out of five of their classes and I have to work with them to come up with a plan to convince their teachers to give them another chance...some kids don't have the skills to do it themselves so you have to role play and kind of get them mentally and physically prepared to have that conversation whether it be with the teacher or admin or with their parent.

Morgan said:

I had one student that has a ten percent in her history 30 class but...just kind of walked away from history class, and so I had to have a conversation with administration who were ready to, you know...ten percent, it's the end of April, hasn't been here for three weeks, it's over, right? So, I had to kind of be with them and kind of encourage them to relook at this, had to take her, eventually took her to the classroom teacher, and, you know, see if they can reconcile some stuff here, *what we can do to kind of get this credit so that this young lady can move on?* Sometimes it's just a case of asking again and again and again for second chances for students because they did this or they did that or their behaviour sometimes. Sometimes we house them in the guidance office because their behaviour is not appropriate, so again trying to develop some good skills so they can function in the classroom and asking the teacher for a second and third and tenth and twentieth chance sometimes.

Two counsellors, Chris and Harper, used the phrase "go-between" in describing advocating for students in relation to both teachers and parents. Kelly said, "Speaking with teachers about whatever plan you might have made for the kid to catch up or recover whatever assignments or things that are missing." Dana said:

Right now especially we've got a handful of students on graduation probation, so they're at risk of not graduating. So advocating with them, for them, telling them that you believe in them, making those visual plans of how they're going to get caught up, how they're going to be in passing position, working with their teachers, definitely trying to advocate for them. Even, you know, I probably do a job reference a week or so, I would say, so you're somewhat advocating in that sense.

Terry said that sometimes students need the counsellor's help in advocating with parents: "Sometimes I think I'm even advocating with parents, some parent who's trying

to force their kid into pre-calculus and it's clear this is just devastating to this child who just can't do it." Chris said:

Advocating for their learning needs, advocating for their emotional needs, social-emotional needs. Maybe advocating with parents for them to go to counselling, you know, outside counselling. Maybe the student is telling us things that they're not ready to talk to their parents about, but having us help them with that process so we're advocating for that, for them.

Counsellors spoke about advocating for students to be afforded additional chances. Morgan said, "Sometimes it's just a case of asking again and again and again for second chances for students, you know, because they did this or they did that or their behaviour sometimes." Taylor said:

I also have a lot, a few situations where's there's kids who have a bad rap. Being in the K-12 school, unfortunately, if you're kind of a stinker in grades three, four, and five, you're labelled for the rest of your career in that building. So I've had a few times where it's like, *no this student can do this, this student is trying to change. We need to be giving them a shot.*

Two counsellors spoke about advocating for students to receive a lesser consequence from the school's administration. Kelly, an urban counsellor who also has teaching duties, gave this experience:

Last week a kid called me a dick...so our vice-principal was going to kick him out, suspend him for a couple of days, but I went to bat for him and said *hey, don't go and suspend him, keep him here at school...*and I just told the vice-principal that I wanted to have control over the consequences...because the kid hated school anyway, so sending him home would have been a holiday, and if he stayed at school, then he's in my class, and he can deal with me sort of thing. So, and it's funny to me because he thanked for it. He said to me, *they were going to kick me out but you said no, how come? Thanks, I would have been in trouble with my parents.*

The above experience may speak to the notion that counsellors may express views which are contrary to the view of the in-school administrators.

*Advocating for students for issues of social justice.* About why advocacy work may be necessary, Chris said, “I might say an injustice....Something wasn’t fair. Something wasn’t done right. Something needs to change.” This statement suggests that, although mentioned only twice by two participants, counsellors may unite the issue of advocacy work with issues of social justice. Terry said:

Kids don’t always have a voice, especially kids who have had really difficult lives, a lot of them have been acting as adults for a very, very long time and it’s a little bit odd to have them in this school system who sometimes infantilizes kids who have the capacity to make their own decisions with full knowledge of their life and needs whereas the middle-class White folks who run the place don’t always get it.

And to think that a kid needs to get their math when they’re getting beaten up, it’s a little incongruent. I understand why a kid doesn’t give a shit. I mean, they’re trying to survive. I think it’s our job to speak in a coherent way about things like institutional racism and sexism and domestic violence and poverty as they impact education. And you can do it on a grand scale, which is important, and you also need to do it on an individual scale. You have to help those kids today a) get lunch, and b) get some slack from their science teacher. The kid was late? Oh, well. I guess they’re getting their five brothers and sisters to school first before they came to school, so you’re damn right you’re going to let them into class. They got here, that’s a miracle. You should say, *You are a blessing*, instead of, *You are late*.

Terry also gave a further narrative on advocating to support students when they have difficult life circumstances. This experience illumines the counsellor’s role specifically as “translator” for when students act inappropriately in class as a result of substantial pressures of life:

That’s why advocacy is important, because I think the kid who’s traumatized will instead of saying, *I need help*, will say, *Fuck you, bitch*. And so sometimes I’m the one who can translate that and say, *They’re completely overwhelmed, that wasn’t about you*. And I think teachers will take things like that personally. It’s never about us, it’s about this kid’s pain and manners are the last thing that matter when you’re just trying to survive.

I had one student say to me once, *You know how you go to a rich kid’s house and their cupboards are full of food?* and I thought, *Oh my God, that’s a rich kid to*

*you, someone who always has enough to eat. I think I want to move toward making it more fair, I think those kids need a chance. That's why I am such a believer in public education because I think at its best education should be giving kids who don't have a chance a chance. Inequities happen in lots of different ways. They happen in terms of poverty, they happen in terms of intellectual differences, they happen in terms of family situations which are violent or non-supportive, addictions, mental health issues. I hear people glibly saying all the time, *If you don't want to go to school, just go and get a job*, and I think, *You don't have a fucking clue, do you? How can you say that so cavalierly when you don't even know what happened to this child who walked in the door?* And so I think that I have to be the voice of the story if the kid can't.*

The above comments are profound because they affirm the specific life circumstances of students that school counsellors may be witness to and it asserts the counsellor's role in being a voice for students in advocacy work. They also represent the amount of emotional energy and compassion that counsellors put into their work with students.

*Advocating for Indigenous students.* Jordan spoke about advocating for

Indigenous students to receive band funding for further education:

Two First Nations-declared students from (First Nations Band) applied to university and have been accepted in the college of arts, they both want to get into psychology. They work hard as students, they struggle, their grades aren't great, but they're, working very hard...so now I've arranged a meeting with them with the coordinator of the program at the (name of university orientation) day and they're really keen on that program. And I think it would lead to so much success for them. And so I work really, really hard through emailing back and forth as a facilitator and getting that set up, I've been in contact with the post-secondary coordinator on (First Nations Band) to keep them, because sometimes that could be a very political football, dealing with the bands, and not doing...making sure you're following protocol and then making sure you're not making the mistake and not following protocol...

*Advocating for students who have exceptionalities.* Three experiences were shared about advocating for a student with exceptional needs. The first represents how contradictorily the counsellor may have handled a serious situation if given the chance. The outcome for the student may have been drastically different if the counsellor would have been present. Dallas said:

We were on lockdown. We had a kid with a knife. They got the kid into the stairwell. They tried to get the knife from him but he wouldn't give it up. This is a kid with [exceptionalities]. You have a knife in your pocket. That's his knife, that's his stuff. *You can't take my stuff!* [Kids with exceptionalities], you don't take their stuff. And he kept on saying, *That's mine. But it's mine.* You have to give us the knife. *But it's mine, why do I have to give it to you?* There's a police officer in the building. The officer comes, intervenes, tries to get the knife. *No, it's my knife. You can't take my knife. I bought it. I bought it from these two boys who said they're going to be my friends.* That's all it was. He just wanted to fit in. It blew so big, they couldn't get it, so then they called in the SWAT team and they had negotiators in and the whole school is in lockdown and they're working with this kid. If I could have been in there, I would have advocated for this kid. If I could have been at the police station, I would have advocated for him. He's still not allowed back into school. The school board is looking into suspending him forever. I'm just thinking, *no. They treated him like a normal 17 year old boy. He's not.* He wasn't thinking like they thought he was thinking. He wasn't thinking *holy shit I'm in trouble and I better give this knife up.* He was thinking *they're trying to take my stuff.* That's what he was thinking but the police don't know that. The police don't know how to deal differently with somebody with [exceptionalities], somebody with a mental disability, whatever.

Dana also spoke about a student with exceptionalities who wanted to be part of an outdoor school experience. In this case, Dana assertively advocated for the student to be part of the program. Dana said:

Like most recently we had a student with [exceptionalities] who applied for outdoor school and it was a heated discussion between the outdoor school teachers, the administration, learning support services, myself, and I fought for him to do the program. He did do the program, he was excellent in the program, so that felt like a real win for me. And you know, it's not always about winning or anything, just when you really believe in something in you really believe he would be a good fit then that's when you think *okay I'm going to fight for this, I'm going to battle for this.*

Another participant spoke about advocating for students with serious medical conditions.

Dallas said,

I had a student come in who just got diagnosed with a brain tumor yesterday...When kids are in crisis, things aren't working or they're just not themselves. They're going through something. I will send a note to all their teachers and I will say *so and so is kind of having a rough time. Just lay off them. If you could give an extension that would be really beneficial.* I never have to go into exactly what's wrong. Sometimes teachers will come and ask me and I'll just

give them the bare bones. Because unless a student tells me I can tell their teachers, I'm not going to.

The above statement attests to the confidentiality guidelines that counsellors must uphold but it also speaks to the trust that teachers, in turn, may have in counsellors that are advocating for students out of necessity.

*Advocating for students who have learning or socio-emotional needs.*

Counsellors spoke about advocating for students' learning or socio-emotional needs.

Jamie spoke about the demands that are on teachers and that a counsellor who advocates for a student may be adding just one more requirement:

Teachers are tired and they are getting more and more expectations on them to have these huge classrooms and, you know, do more with less and so it's easy for them, I think, sometimes, intentionally or unintentionally to say, *no, that kid was a jerk in my class and I'm not going to let them come back.* And they have that right, but sometimes they don't know the whole picture and they can't because of the fact that they're too busy to know the whole picture and that's where maybe they could use somebody to shine a little bit of light on that, at least try to help that student to have a chance to make amends or whatever the case may be to get back into class if that's the case.

*Advocating for immigrant or refugee students.* Another counsellor spoke about advocating for students who are immigrants or refugees. Dallas said:

So refugees come with a lot of baggage and lots of PTSD and most of the ones from Africa are terrified of teachers. Terrified. Because they got beat in their schools. The discipline is you take them out and beat the crap out of them. A couple of girls told me in their school they just had a guy who sat in the back of the room and that was his job. He didn't teach or anything. He just sat there and he would take the kids out and whip them if they were late or whatever. That's how they were dealt with. And they come to public school and it's so different. They go into the classroom and the teacher doesn't smile or the teacher raises his voice and they're terrified. And so, then I deal with those kids because they don't want to go to classes and stuff. And so I speak with the teacher and I have to make arrangements, and I have to pull them in, and maybe we meet with the teacher and I have to be an advocate with them.

The above account is the only narrative in this study that speaks to counsellors working with immigrant or refugee students who may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from experiencing trauma in another country.

Counsellors were asked if they advocate for students intentionally. Dana said, “It depends. Sometimes you don’t realize you’re doing it and sometimes you go on the warpath and you’re ready to fight for a kid.” Kelly said, “I think some of it’s just what you do every day and you don’t think of it as advocacy and you just do it.”

Other counsellors admitted to intentionally speaking up when they perceive a student being treated unfairly. Taylor said, “And if I hear what is said in staffrooms or wherever it may be, I’ll say *really, is that necessary?*” The notion that counsellors place themselves in a strained relationship with other staff members as a result of advocating for or with youth emerged through this account.

*Supporting students through teaching self-advocacy skills.* That counsellors teach self-advocacy skills to students was a major finding of this study that surfaced through numerous participant narratives. Sandy said that counsellors who don’t teach self-advocacy skills to students may be teaching “learned helplessness.” Jamie said:

I get kids coming in upset because they got kicked out of four out of five of their classes and I have to work with them to come up with a plan to convince their teachers to give them another chance. Some kids don’t have the skills to do it themselves so you have to role play and kind of get them mentally and physically prepared to have that conversation whether it be with the teacher or admin or with their parent.

There were many additional expressions about the need for counsellors to teach self-advocacy skills to students. Sandy said:

*Hey, do you think you can forgive them an assignment? Or extend the times for assignments because they’re going through this right now?* But I still make them go and speak to those teachers or administration themselves. In the beginning, I

didn't know this, I didn't do it enough. I was running around crazy trying to help everybody. That's not advocacy, that's helicopter parenting instead of me teaching them the tools to help themselves.

Dallas said:

Kids who fail the class but they handed everything in. Something as simple as that. They come to me, I go to the teacher. Okay, with the kid, *now you tell them what you feel here*. Get them to talk, but I'm there to support them, be an advocate for them. I'll say, *You know, it's not the right thing. I think we should try this and this and this*. So, you know, sticking up for kids, sticking up for kids and helping them with tough stuff and at the same time teaching them how to advocate for themselves.

Taylor said:

I know I do a lot of okay, *but should you be doing that? Let's talk through how appropriate behaviour is*. But a lot of times it's, *you know what? You're right. This whatever happened wasn't right, but you're too afraid to go and talk to that person. If you just want me to go and stand there as a witness*, because there is a power difference between the teacher and the student and sometimes that is so intimidating that kids aren't willing to take that risk and, or take that step, and so, you know, I'll coach *let's talk about how you're going to have this conversation, and then maybe as we go forward, you know, if you want someone to witness the conversation so that nothing can be skewed one way or another, I'll stand there and I'll be your support. Here's what you need to say or how you need to say it. And maybe just come back and talk to me afterwards and say how do you feel about that? Do you think that was productive? Do you think that was effective? Do we need to do something beyond that?* I'm a big fan of self-advocacy, so I think teaching them how to deal with those things is more effective than me stepping in and doing things for them. Sometimes it's sort of coaching them how to deal with either inequities in their classrooms because, as much as I would love to say they don't exist, they do.

Jordan said:

Our current generation of children, one area that they do struggle is the ability to go seek support. Kids are very used to everybody taking them by the hand and placing them in spots. So to me advocacy is I sit with them. If I've showed them and am teaching them that skill, then they have that skill and now they can be a stronger advocate for themselves.

Dana said:

I have a student who is having trouble finding an apprenticeship, so teaching him how to advocate for himself, like what to say when you go visit an employer and ask if they're hiring.

Morgan said:

As soon as you have conflict, you have to be an advocate for yourself or you may have to be an advocate for someone else because conflict is a part of human life. And so if you don't know how to be an advocate for yourself, and to deal with that, then life is going to probably be somewhat difficult. It's what I believe in that students need to learn to advocate for themselves but again it's a learning process.

Morgan also gave this story:

I have a young man the other day who wouldn't go and see the teacher. It's like *no, I can't go, I can't go, he hates me*. And I'm like *well you have to, you have to go and have this conversation with him*.

*No I can't, I can't, you do it.*

*No, you're in grade 12, you need to learn. Yes, I get that he's probably not going to be very happy with you. But you have to, you know, manage this, otherwise this is not going to go well for you.*

*No.*

So what I agreed to do is...the teacher's room is kind of in the corner and right beside it there's vending machines. So I said to him *okay*. I went up to the room and I said *okay (the teacher's) in the room...* We practiced. *How are you going to address him? What are you going to ask for?*

And he said *well you have to come with me*.

And I said *no*, I said *I'll be right out here*. So I stood at the door and then the teacher came out, and so I ran and hid in between the vending machines so the teacher couldn't see me because I wanted him to do this. It's so funny, because I'm hiding basically in these vending machines. And I'm thinking *oh my gosh, this is so ridiculous. Like here you have an 18-year-old kid and I'm hiding in the vending machine because I don't want the teacher to see me*. And so they had their conversation and I listened to it, and then the teacher said to me, *Okay, you can come out now*.

Although there was little humour in the data collected for this study, the above account may be light-hearted. The mental image of the counsellor who finds it important to teach self-advocacy skills to a student hides between vending machines while the student

speaks to a teacher is both funny and profound: It may represent the lengths that counsellors might go to both teach and support students to advocate for themselves.

*Interpersonal strain experienced through advocacy work.* It was evident to me that counsellors who advocate for or with students may experience a strained relationship with teachers. Jamie said:

I'm a people pleaser. I like to be liked by people. And in my role I can't worry about that so much because I piss people off on a regular basis. You know, like, I'm the one that puts that 28th kid into the English classroom. I'm the one who begs or helps try to get a student back into a class after they've told the teacher to f-off, so sometimes I can be seen as *oh, that person doesn't know what it's really like.*

Terry spoke about having information that teachers may not have about a student:

I remember we had one kid and they were saying *well she didn't get any credits this semester.* But she had gotten clean, she left her abusive boyfriend, she got her own place and the next semester she credit completed all her first semester classes and finished her grade twelve. But sometimes you can't get the academics until you deal with the other stuff first.

Another counsellor admitted to being forthcoming about advocating for students and, as a result, created a potential strained relationship with teachers. Dallas said:

That's what I am, that's my job. I'm a student advocate. Well, that's how I introduce when we get all our new grade eights and that's what I say to all the parents *I am your student advocate. I am here for you. I am here to help you learn how to speak up for yourself, protect yourself, get what you want, and be successful* and I'll go to bat for them. Then I'll get into arguments with teachers or whatever.

Jamie spoke about being an advocate for students first and foremost despite the interpersonal strain the role may encounter:

Students quite often don't get to exercise their powers yet, you have to help them realize *this is your life, you need to fight for this, and you can do this* and so some kids are better at it than others and if they're not good at it, I'll go and help in whatever way I need to...and sometimes it can get tricky because staff can sometimes see you as not being on their side, but I'm always on the students' side at first.

Terry experienced internal stress in regards to a student's situation and attempted to advocate on behalf of the student in this way: "I called [an international agency], I thought it was such a travesty, such an injustice, and I couldn't do anything because sometimes things are time-sensitive, and advocacy takes time and you don't always have enough time." It is a profound notion that a school counsellor reached out to an international organization in advocating for a student.

Another participant spoke about helping an entire immigrant family. Hunter's experience brings light to the notion that some counsellors may be involved in supporting entire families of students:

I have a group of students who are in a particular family, there's seven kids in the family, I've got four at the school at the moment. When I started at the school, the eldest one was in grade twelve. She struggled because she was the only English speaker in her family who could take her mother around to appointments and interpret for her mom. I think the school kind of lost patience because she was away a lot and so there was a real intolerance for her constant absenteeism and every time she would promise whatever it was they asked for their big plans for how she was going to succeed and then she put her family first every single time. So her own ambitions are second to what the family needs. They had been through many countries to get to Canada and had a lot of trauma. I was seeing four at the same time and their experiences were heart-wrenching and they seemed to find comfort in the relationship we were able to build.

In addition to settlement issues, Hunter was also concerned about how the issues of addiction, suicide, and trauma impacted the entire family.

**Role ambiguity.** There were numerous responses throughout the course of the interviews which implied that high school counsellors are ambiguous about their role. The topic of role ambiguity is the second-most major finding, next to advocacy practices. Sandy said, "There's always that rumor that people get into guidance because it's a cushy job." This statement represents that teachers are ambiguous about the counsellor's role.

*Ambiguity about confidentiality guidelines.* Counsellors expressed ambiguity over the confidentiality expectation of the role. Terry said, “I can’t tell a lot of people about what I do or what I talk about.” The confidential nature of their role may place counsellors in an awkward or tense position. Sandy described the confidentiality expectations as a risk or challenge:

Most of the risk comes with kids who are in crisis because you tend to urge them to make decisions parents should make. And if somebody talks to the kid the next day, *the guidance counsellor told me to do this*. So, that’s where your risk is, being a parent who is not a parent. When I do those sorts of things with kids, I always try and make them as well-informed as possible and trying to get them to share whatever they are with me, share with me with their parents if at all possible, and your risks tend to come with, again your ethics and your risks are kind of closely-linked, like, because you have to have that confidentiality. You know, parents should probably know or teachers should probably know or someone else should probably know besides just you, and by keeping it a secret, or keeping the confidentiality, if it comes out later, big, bad scene. I’m thinking about kids that I take to Planned Parenthood and that sort of thing. And maybe a mom should know and they don’t want to tell them and I’m okay with that but I try to live by my mantra, not lying for anybody because you get yourself in too much trouble if you try to cover your tracks through lies.

Jamie also spoke about the confidentiality aspect of the counsellor’s role:

If a student has been away for two weeks because they have been away for mental health support but the family doesn’t want the school to know or the teachers to know the particulars of the situation because of the family or personal reasons, then my hands are tied a little bit because I can’t explain to the teachers why it’s important to give this kid another chance and let them into the class and try to minimize the stress as they try to transition. So I have to figure out ways around it as best I can and still have to keep that student without breaching confidentiality. Having to make some difficult decisions that negatively impact colleagues and/or having to keep things from people who probably would do better for that student if they knew the information but, because of the rules, you can’t...

*Unclear expectations of the role lead to ambiguity.* The remaining responses, however, were directed at the unclear expectations in the high school counselling role.

Regarding who determines the role of the counsellor, Sandy said, “Largely by ourselves”

and, “Honestly, I feel like I determine a lot of them myself.” Dallas spoke about the continuous additional duties that seem to be constantly assigned by the principal:

I don’t know how they’re determined and a lot of times things get piled on more and more and more and I’ve come to the realization that it’s because I will stay all night and get it done. My principal is the first one to add another thing on my plate and another thing.

Terry stated:

I think we’re sort of left, as they say, ‘professional judgment’ but I have to say I always feel like there are expectations and they’re not being communicated. Like there are parameters, there are boundaries and what my supervisor says and what counsellors are saying are not in sync all the time. I just try to do my best and I try to keep to heart what is going to be the best for this child. That’s my guiding principle.

Dana prioritized a personal opinion how the role is determined in this way: “So, I think it would be number one your school division would determine, number two your administration, number three kind of what you’re comfortable with and how you actually execute.”

Numerous counsellors expressed ambiguity in regards to how school or school division administrators perceive the role of counsellor. Terry said, “I don’t think it’s clear to my administration what I’m supposed to be doing. I have lots of concerns about what are the parameters about what I’m supposed to be doing.” Another participant, Taylor, said, “I do have a list of things that, from a division standpoint, that I’m responsible for. When I first came into the job, my administrator had an overlap a lot of what I did.” In regards to the administrator communicating expectations of the role to counsellors, Sandy said:

Not in a large way. We don’t have a formal sit-down kind of a thing, *you do this, this, and this*. Our role is defined by who comes through your door and what sort of crisis what sort of need they may have. I never sat down with an administrator and went through exactly what they would like us to do. But they’ll come and

they'll say, *hey can you do this for me? or can you do that for me?* and what they're saying is *you got to do it.*

Morgan said, "They assign us duties but I don't know that our administrator knows what our role is, I'm not sure that *I* really know what my role is, certainly I don't believe it falls within a role description." Jamie articulated a potential disconnect between the actual role of the counsellor and the administrators' perceptions of it:

I would say the majority of my time is spent on the personal counselling aspect of it, but I think if you talk to my administrators they would say that their hope would be that more of my focus would be on the majority of the students and making sure they are having their academic and post-secondary and career goals in line versus dealing with the smaller portion of students that are higher needs.

Jamie also spoke about the disconnect between the school division's written job description for the role but how the role shifts from "quasi-administration" without getting paid for administrative duties to other leadership roles and a role which "shoulders" considerable stress:

We have an actual job description in our division of the school guidance counsellor which has changed over the years and so we use that as a template, but then it really is fluid. It shifts depending on the needs of the students or the time and we work fairly close with administration, almost seen by other staff, as quasi-administration even though we don't get the pay. If they need help, we're seen as leaders and asked to take on that responsibility and help shoulder the stress and so even though there is a clear job description laid out what we really do is probably three times longer.

Sandy also referred to the printed job description the school division has for counsellors and said, "They have that paper that describes the role." Morgan used the phrase "catch all" to describe the role of counsellor in this way:

It's kind of what needs to get done sometimes. A lot of things are transferred to the guidance office, it's kind of seen as a catch-all and everybody who doesn't know what to do with something pushes it to guidance.

Hunter used the phrase “emotional relationship kind of power” that both administrators and teachers shape the role of the counsellor in addition to the needs of the students; however, that the school counsellor’s role may fill the gaps of other understaffed programs may be a significant finding:

There’s a kind of emotional relationship kind of power so your roles change according to who’s in the building and who’s kind of mindset is pushing what thing in the school that year. So part of how I get a role is from the administration and their expectations. Part of my role is from the teachers and their expectations and their willingness to refer or participate or part of I have my role defined what needs we have in the school at that time and trying to fill in gaps where maybe other programs are understaffed or things like that. And a very small of how I get my role is from my defined job description. And then there’s your own personality and how you, the things you do well and the things you emphasize and the things you don’t do as well, so the things you don’t maybe spend as much time on.

Terry said that administrators may not know what the role of the school counsellor is:

I don’t know that my roles and responsibilities have been adequately communicated to my administration. When our new principal came, (she or he) didn’t know what a guidance counsellor did. (She or he) was trying to figure out what the job was.

Dallas indicated that administrators have an unreal expectation of what the role of counsellor requires: “I guess our role, according to the division, is to provide career guidance counselling ninety percent and ten percent personal counselling. Are you kidding me?” The phrase *are you kidding me?* represents the ambiguity between others’ expectations of the role and the role itself. Hunter similarly expressed the role in percentages:

When I started in guidance, I was explicitly told to do sixty percent personal counselling and forty percent career counselling, that my job was not to do deep therapy with kids but to make sure I was meeting the needs of the whole population of the school, not just a few kids who spend all of their time in my office. What happens in reality though is that a number of the services don’t function for kids in the community, so if I have to wait three months to get into a government program to get an assessment that allows me to succeed in school,

and allows me to access programs which allow me to succeed in school, what happens to me in the three months before I get the diagnosis of anxiety or before I get the help with my depression is that I go to guidance.

There is also ambiguity specific to those counsellors who are both teachers and counsellors. Jamie said:

I got called in two years in a row for supposedly having ‘not good attendance’ and so it counts, not only sickness, it counts when you’re away for post-secondary activities or when you’re away for extra-curricular activities, so that’s just part of my job as a guidance counsellor is to go to the post-secondary events and to take the kids. But now it seems as though I’m being almost looked down for it and it’s frustrating because then don’t put me in the classroom because this is what I need to do my job properly.

The above account suggests there is considerable ambiguity when the role of the counsellor conflicts with the expectations of teachers specifically when a counsellor has been asked to fulfill both roles.

*Ambiguity about communicating with students’ parents.* It was evident that counsellors also felt ambiguity in relation to their role communicating with students’ parents. Sandy gave this account:

There’s one negative experience, when I had to call social services on a parent before. The daughter was being physically and emotionally abused and this mother knew obviously it was me who called social services even though social services didn’t say it was me, and then of course she was calling me but I also had her older sisters calling me and telling me that was the truth because they also had gone through it. So that was a very negative experience in the fact that this mother threatened lawyers on me and it, yeah, it was a tough time.

Although it may be the practice that counsellors phone parents for issues such as suicide threats or self-harm, Terry expressed a dubious understanding of the role in working with older students:

I’m always a little uneasy about what’s the expectation for home communication. If I think a kid is suicidal or self-harming, I tell them I’m not going to keep this to myself and I do phone home immediately and communicate with parents about that kind of thing. Although, if they’re eighteen, and they’re self-harming and I

don't think it's suicidal, what's my role there? I would try not to speak to a parent without a child there on speaker phone. But I don't think I had any training, like my job description was a paragraph, but that was, in my mind, inadequate. I help the kid who walks through my door with the best of my ability, maybe?

Counsellors may also have the ability to observe barriers that some Indigenous students experience in relation to securing band funding for their post-secondary futures.

Jordan said:

The First Nations students, when we can get them squared away with all of the barriers and the hoops they have to jump through, that's probably the ultimate that they've been able to line up their funding and get all of their paperwork in order when they needed to and have a plan in place for where they're going to live and that's going to work. And those still are, in my experience, too few and far between. Many with a lot of potential don't go on and they just have a lot of barriers.

*Ambiguity expressed as challenges or risks.* Both rural and urban counsellors expressed ambiguity as a challenge or risk. Taylor gave this account:

I don't have the same high stakes that other counsellors make because I really only deal with that career aspect of it. I get a lot of kids that ask me *well what am I supposed to do? Like tell me what I'm supposed to do.* No, I'm not telling you what to go into, I'm not telling you what the best school is, I'm not telling you how many schools to apply for, because I live in a community where if I were to say anything and that student listened to me, in any stretch of the imagination, then it would come back on me if their child didn't like that, and it would be my fault. So that's probably my greatest risk. I have to watch, I have to draw a line like no I'm not applying for your scholarships for you, you need to go out and find your own scholarships. But I'll show you the ones I get, and I'll point you in the directions to find them, but I'm not doing it for you because if I do it for you, and something goes wrong, I know your parents will be on my doorstep. And they know where I live unfortunately, they very well know where I live, and it's going to be my fault.

Morgan gave a similar response, saying:

I guess a personal challenge is maintaining a positive perspective on things sometimes. Sometimes you can get really caught up in the negative part of things. We deal with a lot of students sometimes that are not very happy. And they don't want to have anything to do with you. And so I guess it's trying to kind of stay balanced and kind of get hooked into that negative that they want to hook you in. You have to start to look beyond the surface and I can't take the surface

personally. Sometimes that's hard, sometimes you get a very rude parent, you're like *really? You have no idea how much I've helped you and this is what you've got for me?* You know, and again trying to step back and say, obviously they're frustrated and so they should be. And so you're the first, you're the direct line of frustration. So trying to put that into balance, and not taking stuff home.

A third response, from Harper, gave this experience:

One of the challenges is I'm dealing with the students themselves who are seventeen and eighteen and they're asking help for applying for a specific program, we do that regardless of whether they say their parents aren't happy about it. Because either the student's going to pay for it themselves or either their parents are going to help with that application or not. There have been instances where parents are *I'm not really happy with that*. Putting an application in doesn't mean that it's forcing them to do that. I feel like I work for the students, not their parents. I've had a few cases where parents have, you know, said things like, *okay seriously, what's your personal opinion? Do you think they would be successful or not?* That is difficult. And, you know, just giving them the best information that you can is obviously what you do. But the challenges I think are helping the students but also having them kind of steer their own ship is very difficult because if somebody will do it for them, most of them are happy to have that happen.

Dana gave this account whereby a parent directs frustration at the counsellor:

I'm pretty good at separating personal and professional. I think partially because we don't deal with social-emotional. But I'm pretty good at walking away at the end of the day and being able to close the workbook. You have to, and you have to have thick skin, too. Every fall without fail I'll have a parent or two phone and chew me out about I didn't prepare a kid well or they're mad about the university, them failing a class, or you know, you'll get one of those, you just, you can't take a lot of it personally. You can take it, you can take it professionally, take it in professionally, try to do better for the next one, if you can take anything out of it as a learning experience. In education, we are in the business of caring and that I think a lot of work conflict between colleagues comes from when you're advocating. And they're advocating for something because they care about something, too.

Urban counsellors expressed ambiguity as a result of their role in helping students with emotional issues. Sandy said:

I'm always in fear that maybe I wouldn't take something serious enough, right, around suicide especially. And it's always even scary even still to this day for me to have to call a parent and say, *Hey, your kid wants to kill themselves*. And I come right out and say it. Saying it straight out to me is always the best thing. So

those are my biggest challenges making sure that I take all the right steps. Did I screw up anywhere, right, could I have done something differently? Would that have helped this kid quicker or better or faster? But if I spend all my time my own self and my *what ifs?* then I won't be healthy in this job.

Sometimes you're never not going to piss somebody off in our job whether it's a parent or a kid or sometimes your administration, other teachers. *Why does so-and-so have to come and see you so much? or What's wrong with...? I know they have this and this but why can't they just snap out of it?* So the challenges are always those people who aren't empathetic to what's going on.

An additional counsellor spoke about the disconnect counsellors may feel in relation to the challenges or risks in helping students with emotional issues. Hunter said:

I have had always the feeling that if I said the wrong thing in a situation where a kid is suicidal or a kid is violent then maybe what I did or what I said was or wasn't enough or so there's that personal heartbreak that goes with helping people through trauma. There's emotional risk in carrying and witnessing the things that society's allowed members in the society to go through, so there's sort of personal emotional risk in being a counsellor and carrying people's grief and trauma and things. It's not a job that I think is easy and I think when you witness and participate in sort of the most tragic and most emotional things that happen in a school, you're witnessing and participating in the most tragic and the most traumatic things that happen in a society. And there is a cost to that, so it's a risky job.

Terry spoke about challenges or risks when parents appear to be unsupportive of their child's school progress: "If you have parents that can support you and you can work alongside them to support a child, that's a good thing. But it can be a challenge because sometimes a parent can be the issue." Chris spoke about the challenges associated with working with students from group homes:

We have some students in a group home and they each have different social workers and then the communication there is not as open as it needs to be and then suddenly someone's pulled out of that home and put somewhere else and we don't even know about it unless a student tells us. You know, those are frustrations.

It is clear through the comments of the participants that counsellors feel ambiguity in the challenges and risks associated with their role in relation to working with teachers.

Terry talked about teachers who want the school counsellor to levy a consequence for a student's action, saying:

I have a lot of colleagues who are lovers of providing consequences for kids and I think that's bizarre because I always think, *What consequence could we possibly impose that could be more motivating than the consequence of their difficult, difficult life?* And I think, I think that's really a middle class notion that we need to provide consequences to motivate kids to behave in the way we want them to. The guidance counsellor's a frustrating person for teachers because we have all this empathy and want to get to support this kid who wrecks their class, and I get that too.

Terry also reported feeling that her or his career may be called into question as a result of the role:

Having to debate with peers about what I'm doing and constantly be under fire. Other people thinking they know I ought to be doing or not ought to be doing and needing to rationalize my time because I don't have a schedule with kids in front of me in every hour. Having new things put on my plate or trying to get things removed from my plate which aren't appropriate and don't fit with guidance. Personally being attacked about how I run things and if I'm running intelligently and whether or not I can keep my position because I advocate for kids and that doesn't necessarily make a cheerleader for the institution or the people running it. I've had to develop a really thick skin around other people's perceptions of what I ought to be doing and I've had to develop a really good plan to be able to reflect what I do back to people so that they can see that I'm working hard so that they don't take away my programs that I've set up or things that I'm working on with kids. And when I'm having to go head-to-head about what happens for kids in the school division or in a particular building, my job and my career are in question.

Chris supported the notion that there are systemic challenges and risks associated with the role of counsellor and said, "The school system, the school division. You know, being able to understand those changes and being able to work within that. Time is a factor."

One of the most surprising results of this study is that counsellors may find themselves in physical challenges or risks. Two urban counsellors gave experiences which illustrate this. Hunter said:

So there's a lot of different risks, there's personal risks when you're dealing with violent people. I've worked, I've taken guns away from kids, I have had kids who were thought to have weapons and threaten to do school violence, and I've needed to convince them to stay in my office until sort of authorities could arrive. I have worked with kids that have really escalated and have not had a way to contact the office to get help. I have had kids over-focus and become sort of obsessed with me a person and in a sort of inappropriate, outside of school contact that was not welcome and was not wanted.

Kelly told this story:

A kid told me he had a pistol and he had it hidden at home at his house and as I got into the story more, I had thought it's a lie, it's made up. But when you're telling a story, you kind of tell he was nervous, and I did something really dumb. I said, *well let's go to your house and get it*. I was reasonably sure that the kid wasn't mad at me but I didn't even think that he would ever turn the gun on me. That thought never even went through my mind until much later. And then twenty minutes this conversation was on and he doesn't want to do that, doesn't want to get it, doesn't want to get it taken care of, so I get the feeling that he's lying. But I've already said that, *let's go get it*. And so I just said, *I just got to step out for a second*. I talked to my vice-principal about it because it was time to bring either an administrator or a parent or a cop in. And we sort of ended up calling on it, calling him on the lie, but the police did go and search his house eventually, so just the thought of driving up there with a kid to go looking and he's supposed to get a handgun was kind of not very well thought through. You never know what's going to come through the door.

Next to role ambiguity, a predominant finding of this research is that high school counsellors are overwhelmed in their roles. This is explored in the section which follows.

**Being overwhelmed.** The counsellors who were interviewed for this study made comments that were categorized into the theme of a being overwhelmed. Counsellors expressed being overwhelmed through statements which indicate the demands upon them are many. Hunter said:

I think we spend about eighty percent of our time counselling students, we have a lot of meetings with a variety of sort of stakeholders in education so other teachers, parents, teachers, student meetings. We have interagency meetings and phone calls and follow ups. I do a lot of kind of PR kinds of things where I'm sending out information and making sure that families know what's happening in terms of careers and in terms of opportunities for kids in their worklife and their academic life and then in their post-high school life.

Another counsellor spoke about being approached by teachers in the hallways. What is important in this narrative is that the counsellor was so overwhelmed she or he questioned her or his own memory. Dallas said:

If I don't write things down, I can't remember. I was getting actually quite worried about my health because I thought *why is my memory going?* If it is not in my phone or on a sticky note and it just doesn't get done. So when I go from the staffroom to my office and I'm stopped by twelve people, *can you see this kid do this can you do this? When can I come and see you?* By the time I get to my office and there's five kids waiting, it's gone. Because as soon as I sit down they're in and they start their issue. All of that stuff of the hallway, it's gone. I'm always saying *please email me please see me, please write it down.* But they don't always do it. And then they're upset because it doesn't get done. You are on informational overload all the time. You have way too many things going on all the time. I have an office but I'm constantly running.

High school counsellors have long days and are frequently faced with more than one issue at a time. Jamie said, "Well I get into my office in the morning and there's at least four kids hanging out waiting." Dallas said, "I had three appointments, triple-booked and they were all waiting to see me plus ten others standing in line and we had a situation in the office." A third participant, Morgan, remarked, "From the minute I drive up to the building, it can start in the parking lot, and it's go..."

When counsellors arrive to work early in the morning, they may be working with students immediately. Terry said, "I'm usually there at 7:30. There are a lot of students with exceptional needs who come early to school and then they want to come in and talk to me." Morgan said, "Before I go to work, I open all my school email. I kind of manage my day before I even get to school." This statement makes me puzzle about why the counsellor felt that the emails could not be addressed once arriving at work.

Counsellors may be overwhelmed because there are times when they are not accessible to students. Sandy said:

Our downtown supervisor has said that we are not to be long-term counsellors, and I like having that kind of parameter because we can't be. What happens when a kid wants to kill themselves in the middle of summer? We're not there.

The above sentiment may attest to some counsellors' sense that youth may require additional supports than those provided by the school counsellor. Terry said:

There were kids that when we didn't hear from for a while I would worry they were dead. Because they were certainly living in situations that were dangerous that they could be murdered by their partner or if they were working as prostitutes.

Jamie said:

Or you can think oh I think I've got this kid on the right track and then you find out they're in the hospital because they attempted suicide and there's something in you like *what? Like I was on the phone with them every day and I was checking in with them every day and everything was in place.*

Both of the above comments convey the sense that counsellors may be acutely concerned about the wellbeing of students.

Counsellors spoke about their long hours of work with the expectation that they use their noonhours for various meetings. Hunter gave this description of a typical week:

Mondays we have a student achievement meeting at lunch. Tuesdays we have an attendance meeting at 8:00. Tuesdays at lunch is peer support. Wednesdays at lunch I see students who don't want to see me when there's class time. On Thursdays at lunch we have a guidance office meeting. On Fridays I have the grade ten team meeting.

Counsellors spoke about their advocacy practices in a way which indicated they are overwhelmed as evidenced through the length and multi-topic nature of their varied responses. Jamie said:

Everything comes to our doors. Anxiety and concerns, especially in the classroom when the teachers are expecting the students to do oral reports...if a student has a diagnosis of anxiety and they say *well it's in the curriculum that they're supposed to present* I say *well okay can we think of a different way to do that where they're still meeting that need but not in front of the whole class?* You know, trying to problem solve around those kinds of things. So anxiety we see a

lot, suicide ideation, self-injury like cutting and those types of behaviours. We see school avoidance which sometimes can maybe because of mental health issues like depression or whatever the case may be. More and more issues related to gender identity and how kids are feeling as far as being accepted in the building. So advocacy is very important in that role. Eating disorders, you know, obviously we don't profess to have all the expertise to deal with all these things so once they hit a certain level we're connecting them with the appropriate professionals and things and, like I said, ultimately, we're the ones who are there twenty-four, well not twenty-four hours a day, but day in and day out.

*Challenges or risks expressed as being overwhelmed.* Terry seemed overwhelmed when speaking about students who may not have the necessary life supports to be successful in school. When sharing this narrative, Terry became emotional:

And I find it really hard when we can't give kids what they need, you know, we can't find safe, reasonable housing for kids, we can't make sure they eat healthy food. In my work I really have to understand what is beyond my scope and I have to let it go because the world is unjust and I probably will not change that from my little office. But, you know, the world is not a kind place to everybody but at least my office can be. Sometimes we help a little and that has to be enough.

Dallas's experience noted that the role itself may be challenging and overwhelming:

The biggest challenge for me is trying to fit everything in. Like I say, it's just contact all day with kids and, and then you have seventy emails from teachers wanting this, *check on this kid, can you see about this kid? Can you change this credit? Can you do this? Can you do that? Can you see this kid? This one just handed in this art work, you need to see it. This one just wrote a poem, can you please read it? This one just confided in me something and I'm handing it over to you.* All those emails and then all those ones from universities and it's all those things you get all the time. There's all the university stuff and the transcripts and the parents calling. *Can you please speak to my kid about this, can you do this, can you do that?*

Counsellors also reported about the more routine tasks they have in supporting students. The section which is to follow presents the many ways in which they accomplish this.

**Student support.** Both urban and rural participants reported they perceive their role to include supporting students as they progress throughout high school towards graduation and the transition to post-secondary education or work. They do this in a multitude of ways. About supporting students generally, Sandy said, “I’m there for them when they can’t handle something at school.” Other counsellors spoke about supporting students through facilitating timetable changes, helping with scholarship or post-secondary education applications, and being part of regular school personnel meetings where student achievement or attendance is discussed.

That counsellors help students with credit attainment or credit recovery is a finding of this study. All counsellors who participated in this study were certified teachers first and all held a current teacher’s certificate. Terry said, “So at the end of the semester, we’re desperately trying to get kids to fifty [per cent], and so I do a lot of work with credit recovery and helping them finish late assignments.” Morgan spoke about keeping potential graduating students in the guidance area during a professional development day to catch up on course assignments. Dana spoke about advocating for students who are on “graduation probation” which involved working intensely with students and their teachers. Dallas said, “I will flip over backwards inside out and upside down to help a kid be successful and it takes up every single second you have.” Terry also spoke about tutoring students in a specific subject saying, “It’s actually a lovely way getting into counselling for kids who are reluctant to come and talk to someone.” Jordan spoke about conducting exit interviews with every graduating Indigenous student in the school division and ensuring that every graduate (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) has an electronic portfolio.

Jordan also spoke about supporting students in four different rural schools each week and being concerned about rural students having life opportunities:

I don't know if you've been to (rural centre) before. It's a great distance away and there's a lot of isolation, they're very isolated up there because the distance...so when we're talking about all these career events, many of them come on in the (urban centre) so for kids to actually go and do things is difficult... but getting them to realize some dreams rather than just settling, that's like becoming my pet project there, to work really, really hard to try to get them to take that step. And most of them don't want to, or are reluctant, and yet they have these dreams they're telling me about, but, you know, scared that so many, so few of them are going to take those steps that they're say they want to take.

Counsellors also spoke about more mundane tasks associated with supporting students such as relaying post-secondary or career information through announcements or going into classrooms to make presentations. They also spoke about the amount of paperwork involved in supporting students including writing reference letters; Harper used the term "administrivia" in addressing the amount of paperwork in the role.

*Providing personal, emotional, or physical support to students.* In addition to offering academic support, it is apparent that counsellors support students personally, emotionally, or even physically. Dallas spoke of helping crying students and also spoke about helping an immigrant student who was frustrated over learning English. Sandy spoke about teaching self-help skills to students so they can help themselves. More than one counsellor spoke about driving students to government-support appointments outside of the school building.

In supporting students emotionally, counsellors had additional specific experiences which illustrated their close connections to students. Sandy said:

My favourite one is a girl I've been working with since grade nine. She's been involved in social services for her whole, since she can remember. Her mother died of addictions and she has moved from place to place to places we know and had social worker from social worker to social worker and definitely has anxiety

and depression. Just watching her grow, she's now in grade twelve, she's graduating. And this is a kid who now lives on her own in an apartment by (name of school) and is still passing her classes and going to get her grade twelve. To watch her go through everything she went through, and she's one of my exceptions, she probably sees me twice a week, right? Because there is no, you know, watching her have to deal with all that, you know, no real parents, and no real big huge support system, but something always kept her going. That's resilience. When you see that resilience in kids you can't help but feel proud. She's probably one I've maybe gone out of my way for a little bit more and even bought her things, you know what I mean?

As demonstrated through Sandy's reflection, counsellors may sometimes be in the position to develop close relationships with students. The language used in the above experience such as "just watching her grow," and, "she's probably one I've maybe gone out of my way for," indicate that counsellors may function in the role of *in loco parentis*.

Dallas gave an experience about supporting students emotionally school-wide after a youth's suicide:

After a suicide it's really difficult. It was really hard at the funeral. I was holding all these kids and trying to help them through. And you don't have time to care for yourself. I was connected to that student in a major way. Very connected to her. But I didn't have that time to grieve because I had to look after everyone else. It becomes heavy. And you have to do it all day, every single hour. That's all you're talking about for a year. It was just, it was just I'm seeking some happiness and I needed to lighten my heart. It was heavy. It was tough. Very tough. And, you know, we did have more mental health support at the time but you make a connection with kids but they don't want to go to mental health, they want to come and speak with you. I mean, there were a few that would get counselling with mental health, but I still had a caseload. It was a heavy time....And it happened three days before school started.

One must ask in such a situation what the emotional toll on the counsellor was. This counsellor also knew the deceased student and may have wanted to express her or his own grief.

Hunter eluded to the concept of supporting students, specifically Indigenous students, systemically because of the perceived barriers Indigenous youth face. Hunter said:

There's still the mindset that First Nations things are for First Nations people and there isn't really the understanding that every culture has something to offer each other in ways of knowing and ways of understanding and ways of living life and so we still have a kind of segregation in our thinking in the school.

Two counsellors spoke about regularly feeding hungry students. Although mentioned intermittently, counsellors also spoke about supporting students with substance use issues. The counsellors also support the mental health of students; this was a pervasive finding from the counsellors' narrative interviews. Their perceptions are explored in the section which is to follow.

**Student mental health.** It is clear from the findings of this study that high school counsellors serve the mental health needs of students, some of which are serious in nature. This may be a unique phenomenon to the role of high school counsellor which sets counsellors apart from other school personnel. Sandy said, "If attendance is one of our biggest things, and we want kids to be here, then we better be looking at mental health. A lot of kids aren't coming because of mental health and addictions." Numerous counsellors spoke about the notion that they are not equipped by either time or circumstance or training to be long-term therapists for students; however, it is an incongruence that the school counsellor may be the most easily accessible mental health professional students have. Sandy said:

Making sure that the students are tied to community agencies and that's where the parent phone calls come in. Because I need their parents to support them in getting to those community agencies because I don't see myself as a long-term counsellor, I'm the school counsellor.

Chris said the role includes, “Understanding the mental health, doing a lot of the triagings [sic], we have to know all the resources out there as well.” The impression of school counsellors conducting mental health “triage” affirms that they perceive themselves as front-line mental health professionals. Sandy said, “So many people in our schools fear anxiety, depression, self-harm, and don’t know what to do. I mean teachers *and* administration.” Sandy’s statement affirms that school counsellors may be considered to be the only mental health professionals in schools. Morgan said, “You have your students who are really, really suffering for whatever reason, mental health, sometimes it’s just exhaustion.”

One urban school division either employs or allows outside mental health professionals to work with students in schools on an itinerant basis; however, according to one counsellor, this service may be ineffective either because of availability or the referral process itself. Dallas said:

The mental health counsellor who comes in once a week actually said these words, *Really, if it’s an emergency, then they need to have the noose around their neck*. So that has put more and more counselling on me. If I do refer them to mental health, it’s a forty-five-minute form that I have to fill out. And the first ones I sent in September were rejected. I had kids waiting two to three weeks to get an appointment with me.

Taylor spoke of the mental health stigma that may be apparent in smaller communities. A finding of this research may be that, although rural counsellors stated they are career counsellors only, they may also be on the front line to help students with mental health concerns. Taylor said:

But we also have that small-town mentality about mental health. Mental health issues are totally not allowed. The old stereotypes of mental illness are *you’re just being weak*. Like it’s not an actual thing. We have a student in grade ten who has diagnosed depression, she has a multitude of mental health issues and she lives with her grandmother and her grandmother says that’s not a real thing. It’s

still taboo, even though we've had so many issues. And so, kids don't say things unless it's way too late. That's typically not part of my job unless the kids are seeking me out because I'm the person they feel comfortable talking to. That typically falls more into the role of the social worker who comes out once a week and that's typically what he deals with. So that typically isn't my job unless I'm sort of sought out by students and then I'll step up and do what I need to do in whatever case it is.

*The prevalence of counsellors working with student anxiety and/or depression.*

Helping students with anxiety, depression, and/or issues of self-harm are common occurrences among high school counsellors. A finding of this study may be not only that high school counsellors deal with these issues regularly, but also that these issues are apparently common among youth. One counsellor spoke about a student survey which reported that anxiety and depression among youth are on the rise. Anxiety and/or depression may impact the classroom directly by limiting student attendance or achievement. Sandy said:

I have kids that come in with anxiety and it's not always the same kids. Kids that are going in an anxiety attack where teachers will call me down to the room to take a kid out and help them that way.

Terry spoke about spending time with an anxious student every morning before classes begin: "Another student suffers with anxiety and he was missing school because he couldn't stand coming in the morning so he comes and talks to me for about ten minutes every morning."

Counsellors support students who are anxious in their academic program. Chris said, "Sometimes we offer learning support by having kids come into our area to write exams because they're anxious, so we support them."

Although the terms *anxiety* and *depression* were spoken of in tandem by many counsellors who participated in this research, there were occasions when either term was

used singularly. Sandy spoke about a technological application to help students with their depression, saying, “I spend a lot of time with my kids showing kids apps, and kids can show me apps now. I just learned about Booster Buddy the other day from my kid who really loves using it.”

*Self-harm and suicide ideation.* School counsellors work with students who harm themselves. Sandy said, “My biggest thing with self-harm is making sure that even my staff and the people that see it in the building realize that self-harm and suicide are two very separate, separate things.”

Additionally, it may be a finding of this study how much assistance high school counsellors give to students who have suicidal ideation. Terry spoke about “Lots of kids who are suicidal, lots of kids who are self-harming, piles of anxiety.” Many others talked about regular dealings with students who were suicidal or even dealing with friends of suicidal students: Chris spoke about working with a student who was concerned because, “She’s been receiving texts through the night and she’s very concerned that her friend is not at school and probably suicidal.”

Terry observed that Christmas may be a particularly stressful time for some students, saying there may be “Lots of suicide before Christmas, lots of suicide ideation.”

Terry explained:

Right before Christmas a lot of kids are panicking because we have a society that acts like Christmas holidays are going to be wonderful but for a whole lot of kids it’s the worst time ever because people are drinking, there’s violence, there’s stress because nobody has enough money to do all the things they feel like they need to do at that time of year or someone does spend all the money on presents and then they can’t pay rent. Kids are scared about being away from school for two whole weeks because school is their safe place.

The process of dealing with suicidal students involves the counsellor calling parents or guardians and often students are hospitalized as a result. The critical point here is not that there are suicidal students who are hospitalized but that school counsellors are frequently the first professionals who identify and work with such students.

There are mental health issues among students other than anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation for which school counsellors enact. Kelly spoke about working with a student with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and Terry about working with a student who was “hearing voices.”

*School counsellors may save lives.* In response to my question for participants to describe interactions that impacted them in either a positive or negative way, numerous counsellors gave accounts which were placed into the theme of mental health issues. There were two responses about students who were grateful because the student felt the counsellor saved her or his life. Jamie said:

I had one student actually bring me to tears because it was a student who was suicidal and he said to me, *had you not heard me when I said how much in pain I was and helped my mom get me to the hospital and call the hospital and be with my mom and do what you needed to do, I would not be here today.*

Kelly said:

I had a girl that was coming through on a regular basis with suicide ideation, depressed, constantly fighting with her parents but she'd come and she'd sit and she'd chat with me and one Saturday she had cut her wrists. And I was having friends over for dinner, and we were just sitting down and she phoned my house. She had my phone number, I was worried about her on the weekend and said, *here, if something gets bad, give me a call.* And it's something I wouldn't do now but I did then. Anyways, she gave me a call and, one of the guys was over at my house, our families were having supper together, and he came with me and we went over to where the kid was and we talked to her and I got her to go home and told her she had to call me when she got home. She wouldn't come with us, she had cut one of her wrists. She showed me and it wasn't lethal or life-threatening by any means, and anyway so I had gotten her to give me a call. We wanted to take her to the hospital and she absolutely refused and it was a kicking and

fighting kind of thing. So anyways, a couple of weeks later, she was in a situation where she was going to attempt a suicide or it sounded quite close to it, so I got the police officer to arrest her and take her to the hospital. And as bad as I felt about that, I kind of felt at the time it was the right thing to do, it was an extreme situation, so we went to the hospital. I ended up staying in the hospital with her until about midnight that night and then they finally said I had to go and couldn't stay any longer. And she really battled with her mom in the ER. She stayed there for about a week or so and then was back at school and still coming to talk, I thought she'd hate me and she didn't, and she came to talk to me all the time, and she was one who would leave me notes all the time, letters and leave them for me, and I thought *okay*. And right at the end of the year that year, she knew I was moving. And she had just graduated, too, I think. And the last letter she gave me, she kind of went through all the things that I had helped her, do for her, and in the last paragraph she said *thank you for saving my life*. So I've always kept the letter, it's in a little place in my desk. I haven't looked at it in a long time. And it's one of those things that's sort of inspiring, that maybe I did something right, something worked out even though it was kind of ugly.

*Doing whatever it takes to help students.* Some counsellors appear to have a *whatever it takes* attitude in helping students who have mental health issues. Dallas spoke about trying to coax an anxious student into school:

I'll use Joel<sup>5</sup> that's in grade nine and has developed this anxiety that he can't walk into a building. So every day Joel leaves for school and when Joel is like exactly one block away, he starts shaking and hyperventilating and sweating and his heart's beating and he goes back home. At first I was able to get Joel to come in and try and talk and do things and *let's just have you work in my office*. And we try that, you know, for a couple of days. *Just come and work in there instead of go into the classes*. And Joel's anxiety got deeper so I referred Joel to mental health so they can work with his anxiety and I was working on a plan to get Joel back into school. I made a plan with teachers, like *okay, you bring some work and I will get Joel working in my office where there are no people around*. That plan didn't work. So the next week, *new plan everybody*. I will meet Joel when he's one block away. Joel will text me, I will go outside the school and I will walk Joel in. *Please have the work all ready*. Mom brings Joel to school, I went outside, it was freezing. And I got into the back seat of the car because Mom texted me and said I can't get Joel out of the car. I sat in the back seat of the car for twenty-five minutes. I can't get Joel out. *New plan. How about we do this?* We're going to do an online class. I got Joel an online math class. I arranged with the teachers like *what units has Joel covered?* set Joel up with the online teacher and said, *I only want Joel to cover these units. And Joel can come and work with me. New plan...* I changed Joel's plan fifteen times and we still don't

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<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym is used to protect student identity.

have Joel in school. Whatever works to get him back to school, I will just keep changing the plan until it works.

School counsellors advocate for the mental health needs of students. In the section which is to follow, this notion is brought to life through counsellor-participant narratives.

*Counsellors advocating for the mental health issues of students.* One of the ways in which school counsellors advocate for the mental health needs of students is to appeal to teachers' understandings. Sandy said:

I advocate for her with her teachers often. She allows me to tell them some of her history so they understand sometimes when she's not there. Sometimes with the teachers now, they're much more forgiving. I advocate for students, lots of students in that way.

I see myself as a big advocate for many kids in the building, those with mental health especially. I spend my time making my staff aware of mental illness, to advocate for mental health which is to me advocating for these students, because if you understand more, and teach those kids to be advocates for themselves, you know maybe you need to tell your teachers some of this.

Although mentioned infrequently, the issue of trauma surfaced during the participant interviews. Terry said:

I think trauma plays a role in education that we don't even understand...kids who are living in abusive homes, kids are living in extreme poverty, kids who are coming from refugee camps, they're coming from a place of trauma and schools are, for the most part, not very trauma-sensitive.

It is evident by the aforementioned accounts of the school counsellors who participated in this study that they perceive themselves as mental health professionals who are easily accessible to students. While this is clearly a major aspect of their role, an associated theme arising from the participants' narratives was that counsellors spend much of their time communicating with parents about the mental health of students and other issues.

**Parental communication.** Many of the responses from this study indicate that counsellors regularly communicate with parents. Morgan suggested that, “Our job is probably twenty-five percent of our day is dealing with parents who are just exhausted and frustrated.”

Many responses obtained through this study indicated that school counsellor-parent interaction is constructive. Jamie said, “Parents in my view, they’ve always been very positive and very welcoming of the information and the support offered.”

Counsellors may call parents in issues such as, “We called over her daughter having drugs,” or calling about issues of student mental health. Sandy said, “Probably at least once a week it’s a parent phone call talking about their kid in regards to anxiety and depression.” Counsellors are on the front lines of calling parents for youth who have exhibited suicide ideation or have made suicidal threats and, working with parents, counsellors are front line workers in getting students hospitalized for mental health reasons.

Counsellors also support parents and this may involve a significant amount of counsellor time. Dallas said, “Called their parents, meetings...each one of them took an hour.” Dallas also described offering direct support to a parent: “So mom came down, consoled her a little bit.”

Counsellors, however, are sometimes on the receiving end of parental aggression. There were three responses that indicated this may be so: Dallas said, “The parent just wanted to attack me, it’s just the aggressiveness, parents don’t like it when their dirty laundry gets exposed at school.” Sandy said:

I do spend a lot of time talking to parents. Parents on the whole love their kids and they sometimes don’t like hearing what I have to say and are very shocked by

it, but I always find interaction with parents ends up being good even if they may be a little bit angry at the beginning.

A third response about parental aggression, from Morgan, was stated in this way:

So just working with them and kind of encouraging them and just sometimes even listening to them, they're appreciative. And on the other hand, they're not appreciative. Sometimes because they don't want to hear what you have to say. Some parents are very demanding. I find that if the student isn't doing well at school then usually they're not doing that well at home, either and we're the ones the parents lash out at.

There may be challenges or risks when counsellors communicate with parents.

Jordan offered this experience:

My biggest challenge is parental understanding of what it takes for a kid to realize their potential because I have all sorts of information at my disposal. To get parents to understand how their role is way bigger than mine. Like career means life, it doesn't necessarily mean what job we're going to work at, it means what kind of lifestyle, friends and acquaintances and community involvement and personal involvement and their own families and everything else. How important parents are in the realization of all those successes and dreams and steps to take and how big a piece they play and how big a role they play and even how their kids are selecting courses. That's a big challenge because many parents, their lives are tough, their own environments are maybe suffering. Parents may not be providing any role in that aspect for their kids. They're trying their best to feed their kids and have things for their kids and everything else, but that understanding how big the parents' role is and how can kids drive where they're going to in life is, it's huge, and that to me is the biggest challenge as a career counsellor is that trying to help parents realize how big, how huge their role is.

The above experience suggests that some parents may leave all the guiding work related to career or post-secondary opportunities in the counsellor's hands. The counsellor, in turn, may feel frustration that some parents may not take a more active role in their child's future.

In probing counsellor-participants about their role and responsibilities, there were numerous responses which indicated that a school counsellor's days may be unpredictable.

**Unpredictable days.** Counsellors indicated that there is no typical day in their working lives. Dana said, “A typical day would mean that I have a to-do list and nothing on it gets done.” Counsellors said their working day may start early in the morning. Chris said, “It could be first thing in the morning a student comes and reports...” They reported having “unplannable” days, a multitude of meetings throughout the day, a quiet day or a day “where the world was falling apart.” A two-decade veteran counsellor said:

There’s never a typical day...some days I never even look at anything that I thought I was going to do...and I think it’s become more of that over the years. Seems like a lot of things come to guidance to park that maybe never used to come to guidance to park.

Other participants responded that, in their work supporting students, no two days are alike. In their practice, counsellors also reported collaborating with other professionals routinely. The next section therefore displays the responses that were grouped into the theme of collaboration.

**Collaboration.** The counsellors who participated in this study frequently spoke about collaborating with in-school administrators and teachers as well as other helping professionals in the community. There appears to be a unique relationship that counsellors have with their school principals. Sandy said:

I spend time in my vice-principal’s office and my principal making sure they’re up to date on who I’ve seen. If I need to call social services, I make sure that they know who I’m calling and why I’m calling first.

Taylor said, “I also get pulled in from time to time when we have parent meetings, but not as much as usually my admin just asks me for the answers and I just tell them and they deal with it.”

Only one participant spoke about both giving and receiving support from other counsellors in the same school. Not all counsellors who were participants for this study

had counsellor colleagues in the same school and, additionally, some rural counsellors were itinerants.

Counsellors also perceive their role as support for other professionals in the community. Dana said, “You’re support for the child and family support worker.” More often, however, were responses about concerns counsellors have in obtaining outside professional support for students. Terry said:

And so there’s challenges with communicating with government youth services and I don’t blame them for anything. They are so overwhelmed. The mental health system in our city and our province and our world are inadequately staffed. There’s not enough resources for these kids.

In addition to collaborating with other professionals, school counsellors also reported supporting the staff in their schools. This is presented in the following section.

**Staff support.** In addition to supporting students, communicating or even supporting parents, and collaborating with other professionals, school counsellors also support other adults in the school. One participant spoke about supporting the administrator and more common responses included teachers having appointments with school counsellors. Chris said:

And teachers, too, need a lot of support. It’s not necessarily our role to be, to be in that position with teachers. We are that first line for teachers as well, so sometimes advocating for their needs, that they have a classroom of thirty-five students and a full range of needs of students and they need support, too.

Chris said, “Maybe it’s a teacher that’s really having a lot of issues or concerns about a student,” and Dallas said, “There were three teachers waiting at the end of the day to see me about programs, about students, about classes.” Dana said, “You’re support for the learning support team.” A finding of this study includes how school counsellors perceive their role in supporting teachers.

A finding of this study also is that counsellors are called upon to be acting administrators. Chris said the role may involve “taking the place of an administrator” and Dallas said:

I dealt with that because my principal wasn't there today so there was an acting principal who hadn't done it before. We had to check their lockers, check their bags, check their persons, make sure they didn't bring drugs into the school.

Another counsellor said it is because of the counsellor's vision of the school in its entirety that often they are asked to be acting administrators. Dana said, “I do the acting admin [sic] role quite a bit. I'm easy to cover off and I have a really good general student population understanding.”

In addition to supporting staff and supporting administrators through an acting administrator role, counsellors perceive their role to be on the front lines of crisis.

**Crisis.** It is evident through the responses of the counsellor-participants that counsellors assist in times of crisis. Morgan said, “You deal with life-threatening situations, you deal with missing students,” while Chris indicated that counsellors are often on the front-line of crisis: “So contacting the police, trying to find the family, trying to find out what's going on at home.” The police were also mentioned again by Chris in terms of a student disclosure: “It could be someone finally disclosing something and maybe bring in the police, maybe social services.” Chris spoke about counsellors being placed in the role of police officers in a routine drill at the school: “Secure the building. We guidance counsellors were asked to be like police officers to go knock on doors and check rooms.”

The mental health issues of students may surface as crisis. Chris said, “Then, if the student is able to come in, you're working with the student, you're trying to

triage...get them to the hospital.” Dallas said, “I had two kids hospitalized this year during a week that I had five suicide interventions.” That statement alone represents the emotional weight of student concerns which fall upon high school counsellors. It is because of the awareness of such emotional weight of the role that some counsellors spoke of the necessity of self-care, mentioned five times in the interview narratives and representing the least-frequently coded theme.

**Self-care.** The theme of self-care emerged. Sandy said, “I was ready to quit because I didn’t know how to go home and let go. I wasn’t sleeping...self-care.” Other responses spoke about updating or “keeping up” as a form of self-care and another remark alluded to the time constraints of counsellors.

Through the semi-structured interviews, the twelve counsellors who volunteered for this research gave thorough and rich descriptions of their perceived roles as presented in this chapter. Chapter Five, *Data Analysis, Discussion, and Implications*, will use these data to generate thematic findings related to how high school counsellors perceived their role and will also discuss recommendations and implications for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Data Analysis, Discussion, and Implications**

This chapter presents the data analysis, discussion of the findings, and includes recommendations and implications for further research. In 2009, Kaffenberger and Davis called for school counsellors to participate in research about school counselling. This present study fulfills this mission: As a practicing high school counsellor and doctoral candidate, I conducted qualitative research using collective case study methods with a cohort of twelve high school counsellors about their perceptions of their role. Each counsellor represented an individual case; thus, this is a collective case study because individual data were coded collectively. Semi-structured interviews were audiotaped and transcribed thereby providing the raw data for this research. The data were then interpreted and analyzed using a meta-analytic coding system as described by Stall-Meadows and Hyle (2010). Participants' interview narratives were reduced and coded in an open procedure to create subcategories according to the participants' keywords. Axial coding reconfigured the participants' raw data in a new way. It was my "interpretive activity" (Ferguson, 1993, p. 36) which then used the axial codes to create topical units which were "developed based on recurring conceptual relationships that emerge from the studies" (Stall-Meadows & Hyle, 2010, p. 416). These topics, presented in the previous chapter, are now analyzed and discussed as emerging themes (Popadiuk, 2010).

Coding is an important activity in analyzing interview data (Kovach, 2009; Weston et al., 2001). Coding assists the researcher to prioritize findings. For this study, the findings are presented in hierarchical order based on coding frequencies of the narrative data.

## **Presentation and Discussion of Coded Topics**

An emerging thematic perspective, as revealed in the first and most prevalent typology, is that high school counsellors experience tension in regards to their role. Ten of the eleven topics, restated as themes, fall under the typology of tension. They are thrust forward in the discussion which is to follow. The only coded topic which did not illustrate inherent or apparent tension was student support. This topic will therefore be discussed after the other ten topics in this chapter.

The questions posed to participants in this study were divided into two broad categories: The first series of questions were directed to obtain participants' demographic data as well as information about the schools in which they worked. These data have been discussed in Chapter Three, *Research Methodology*. The second series of questions were posed to collect data pertaining to how counsellor-participants perceived their role and how or if they advocate for or with students. These data were reported in Chapter Four, *Findings and Presentation of the Data*.

The first topic analyzed in this chapter, *advocacy practices*, is set apart and given priority because I asked participants specifically about their advocacy work for and with students. Through asking specifically about counsellors' advocacy work, I was seeking data about counsellors' advocacy practices and also determining if their advocacy work has a social justice agenda. Participants' responses led to the theme that counsellors revealed a multitude of ways they advocate for or with students. As explored in Chapter Two, *Review of the Literature*, a distinct difference between the Canadian and American scholarship on counsellor advocacy practices is the American discourse that unites counsellor advocacy with social justice. While Canada and the United States have a

shared history in the school counselling discourse, the American school counselling scholarship in the early twenty-first century ventured towards a social justice advocacy approach while the Canadian scholarship did not do so in the same way. This may be due to the Civil Rights activism that surfaced in the United States in the late twentieth century. This is not to say that social justice is absent in the Canadian school counselling scholarship altogether (see Arthur & Collins, 2014; Bezanson et al., 2016). It was a therefore a matter of critical discovery for this doctoral work to learn if high school counsellors have a social justice agenda in their work advocating for or with students. Because the question of how school counsellors practice advocacy was asked specifically, this topic represents the most prevalent findings of this study.

**How high school counsellors perceived their role.** Eleven topics are now discussed using two conceptual typologies (Thomson & Palermo, 2014) which represent the complexity of the research findings: The first typology, *tension inherent in counsellors' roles*, encompasses the rich data that emerged from the counsellor-participants' narratives (which includes ten topics) in which complex, interconnected, and competing tensions arose. The second typology is more descriptive in nature and describes the participants' perceptions of their role which did not embed complex or competing tensions. This included the singular topic of student support, listed as the fourth most prevalent topic through the coding frequencies of the data.

**First typology: *Tension inherent in counsellors' roles.*** Participant responses revealed that there is considerable tension among high school counsellors about their role. This tension is explored through the analysis and discussion of participants' responses, coded as topics, and now presented as emerging themes.

*First topic: Advocacy practices. Emerging theme: Counsellors revealed a multitude of ways they advocate for or with students.* Counsellors support students through advocating for or with students. Participants spoke about the term *guidance counsellor*<sup>6</sup> being synonymous with *student advocate*. One counsellor provided a multitude of ways in which counsellors may advocate for or with students: They advocate for students with teachers, in-school administrators, and parents. They advocate for or with students in crisis, to access programs, and they speak up for students in “unconventional” ways. Counsellors advocate for students academically, even serving as scribes or adapting curricular material for students. Counsellors advocate for students of different cultures first by learning about their culture. They advocate also by helping students to access community programs and they may advocate for students in the face of institutional policies which unintentionally hurt students. The advocacy activities stated above add to the tension inherent in the counsellor’s role because the counsellor finds her or himself in opposition to other in-school personnel or school policies. Other ways in which high school counsellors spoke about their advocacy work are discussed below:

a) *Counsellors advocate for students to be successful in school.* Counsellors advocate for or with students to experience academic success. They do this primarily through appealing to teachers to offer extra assignment time or assignment forgiveness for students who require accommodations because of personal circumstances. Counsellors described their role as a “go-between” (two counsellors’ exact words) when they advocate for or with students with teachers and it was also reported that counsellors appeal to teachers to give students a chance despite past reputations.

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to Chapter One, *Introduction to the Problem*, for an explanation of how the terms in this study are used.

Counsellors may even serve as student advocates in relation to students' parents by explaining to parents why their child may not be successful in a specific academic class. Counsellors also advocate for students with school administrators to lessen a student's consequence: Counsellors reported appealing to school administrators against student suspension.

b) *Counsellors' advocacy practices may be related to issues of social justice.*

Some counsellors spoke about the role of social justice in relation to advocating for or with students. Counsellors spoke about being the "voice" of students, advocating for students amidst students' difficult life circumstances, or even "translating" for students when their words or their actions offend teachers.

School counsellors also expressed concern for the present and future wellbeing of Indigenous students. One counsellor spoke about advocating for Indigenous students to receive band funding. This put the counsellor in tremendous tension and she or he described the process as "a very political football" because of the potential errors in protocol that could be perceived by the funders.

Counsellors also reported advocating for students who have exceptionalities or those who have serious medical issues. One counsellor shared a detailed account of how a student with an exceptionality was perceived as dangerous by school and justice officials. This participant reported, "If I could have been there, I would have advocated for this kid" and remarked that the student is still not allowed back in the school. It was profound to me that counsellors notice what others may not notice and, further, may carry an emotional burden of consequences that are levied against students.

Another counsellor also spoke about advocating for a student with an exceptionality: In this instance, the counsellor advocated for the student to attend an outdoor school in a “heated discussion” with other school personnel. The counsellor said, “I’m going to fight for this, I’m going to battle for this.” That school counsellors, because of their advocacy work for or with students, place themselves in conflict with teachers and/or the school administration is a distinct finding from this study: This example demonstrates the kind of tension which is inherent in the role of counsellors.

Occasionally, counsellors advocated for students who have serious medical conditions but, because of the confidentiality guidelines counsellors must uphold, they may not be able to give teachers precise information as to a student’s condition. One counsellor remarked, “I never have to go into exactly what’s wrong.” This statement demonstrates that counsellors who advocate for a student with a medical condition are trusted by some teachers who accommodate for a student despite not knowing the precise details of the student’s medical condition. There is tension in asking teachers to accept the counsellor’s advice or suggestion without knowing all the details. This is a question of trust which can create tension if that trust is not implicit.

c) *Counsellors advocate for students who have learning or socio-emotional needs.* There is apparent tension when counsellors advocate for students who have learning or socio-emotional needs. Counsellors are aware that teachers may be overwhelmed and that when counsellors ask for further student exceptions adds additional burdens to teachers who have large numbers of students or who have many students with individual exceptionalities.

d) *Counsellors advocate for immigrant or refugee students.* High school counsellors advocate for students who are immigrants or refugees. They are aware that some immigrant and refugee students may have post-traumatic stress disorder and may come from terrifying environments. One counsellor noted that teachers in Canadian classrooms may not realize the impact their facial expressions or tone of voice may have on immigrant or refugee students. The school counsellor works with traumatized students but also advocates for the students with teachers so that teachers have a better understanding of immigrant and refugee students' experiences.

When asked if counsellors advocate for students intentionally, various responses were obtained. Some claimed advocacy occurs without deliberate intention. One counsellor, however, said, "and sometimes you go on the warpath" to advocate for a student. The use of the term *warpath* suggests the tension that counsellors may face with their teacher or administrator colleagues in their advocacy work for students.

e) *Counsellors support students through teaching self-advocacy skills.* A considerable amount of data referred to school counsellors' positions that teaching students self-advocacy skills as being important. One counsellor said that "learned helplessness" might result if a counsellor does not teach students how to advocate for themselves. In relation to students advocating for themselves in the face of teachers, the school administration, or their parents, counsellors role-play to allow students to practice self-advocacy. Counsellors believe that students should advocate for themselves with teachers for assignment forgiveness or assignment due date extensions; however, counsellors are integral helpers in teaching students how to do so. Counsellors also teach self-advocacy skills to students so students can obtain apprenticeship or job opportunities.

Counsellors teach self-advocacy skills to students so that students may learn how to deal with conflict effectively.

In teaching self-advocacy skills to students, counsellors may accompany students as they speak to teachers and use the skills taught by a counsellor: One counsellor shared an experience whereby hiding behind vending machines was done to conceal the counsellor's presence while a student self-advocated with a teacher. The vision of the counsellor hiding between vending machines to overhear a student's conversation with a teacher is evidence that counsellors go to atypical lengths to help students solve problems but also contributes to tension about the role. Is it ethical to eavesdrop on a teacher-student conversation? Teaching self-advocacy skills to students was spoken about by numerous counsellors and represents the paradigm that the counsellors in this study, all certified teachers, may see themselves as teachers first and counsellors second. This represents a predominant finding.

f) *Counsellors experience interpersonal strain through their advocacy work.* The confidentiality guidelines to which counsellors must adhere place counsellors under considerable strain when communicating with teachers. Teachers may believe a counsellor who advocates for students “doesn't know what it's really like” according to one research participant. Because counsellors are positioned to learn confidential details about the personal lives of students, they may view *success* differently than teachers. One counsellor shared an example of a student who did not complete any credits in an entire semester (and therefore appeared unsuccessful to teachers), but the student overcame addictions, left an abusive relationship, and secured her own home. Counsellors may get into arguments with teachers and place themselves at odds with

teachers because counsellors see their priority as advocating for students. A participant spoke about helping an entire family who had recently immigrated to Canada. The counsellor advocated for one of the students in the family amidst the student's absenteeism from school; the counsellor understood that the student was helping the family but other school personnel did not understand this. In advocating for a student, one counsellor called an international agency; this makes evident counsellors' intentions to go to any extreme that is necessary in their advocacy work.

In addition to counsellors experiencing tension in their advocacy work for and with students, they also experience tension as a result of the ambiguity of their role. This was a predominant finding from this study.

*Second topic: Role ambiguity. Emerging theme: Counsellors and other school personnel are ambiguous about the counsellor's role.* It was evident that counsellors, and other school personnel, are ambiguous about the role of the school counsellor. One counsellor stated, "There's always that rumour that people get into guidance because it's a cushy job." The implication of this statement is that the role of school counsellor is not *cushy* and that those on the outside of the counsellor role do not know what the counsellor does. Confidentiality guidelines, unclear expectations, and communicating with students' parents are areas for which create ambiguity for counsellors. Further, role ambiguity was expressed by counsellors as a challenge or even risk. Counsellors expressed ambiguity about their role in a number of areas:

a) *Counsellors are ambiguous about confidentiality guidelines.* High school counsellors must keep student issues confidential. One counsellor said, "I can't tell a lot of people about what I do or what I talk about." Another said that it is risky to judge

what to keep confidential and what to share: There were occasions, such as when a counsellor took a student to Planned Parenthood, that she or he thought that the student's parents should know about. While the counsellor urged the student to inform her parent, the student may not have chosen to do so. The ambiguity of student confidentiality contributes to the tension inherent in the counsellor role. Adding to the ambiguity is that their school divisions may have dubious ethical guidelines specific to the counsellors; only one school division has a job description that specifies that counsellors must abide by confidentiality in keeping with privacy legislation and the legislated act for youth offenders. This job description also states that counsellors are forbidden to discuss topics which are not put before the public. Counsellors in this school division must therefore work within this framework of confidentiality, a framework which may be complex and subject to individual interpretation.

Another participant spoke about a student who was absent from school for two weeks and, even though the counsellor knew the reason, the family did not want other school personnel to know. The participant said, "So I have to figure out ways around it," which suggests how problematic and potentially stressful it can be in helping the student without sharing details of the student's absence with colleagues.

b) *Unclear expectations of the role lead to ambiguity.* When asked who determines the roles of the counsellor, participants said, "Ourselves," and, "I feel I determine a lot of them myself." Role ambiguity leads to additional duties being assigned by the principal ("My principal is the first one to add another thing on my plate and another thing"), and one participant said there may be expectations about the role but no one is communicating them. There are dissimilarities between what supervisors say

about the counsellor's role and what other counsellors say about the role, but doing what's best for the student may be the counsellor's "guiding principle."

Counsellors reported that school division administrators may be dubious about the counsellor's role. One counsellor said that the role of the counsellor may even "overlap" with the in-school administrator. Another spoke about crisis driving the counsellor's role but that administrators also place extra responsibilities on the counsellor. There was a reported disconnect between what school principals believe the role should be and what the role actually is: While counsellors spend most of their time in personal counselling with students, some principals appear to believe counsellors should spend most of their time in academic or post-secondary counselling. This is a significant disconnect because it suggests that even school principals (who are in a position to observe the role of the school counsellor) may still operate in the paradigm that a counsellor's role is to guide students towards post-secondary options. The reality is that high school counsellors reported that much of their role involves counselling for reasons other than post-secondary guidance such as social-emotional, personal, or mental health reasons. Additionally, they acquire external services for students and their families and advocate for a wide range of needs for students.

Another counsellor said that a school division's written job description does not accurately reflect the role; the role may be three times more involved than what the job description notes. Because counsellors may be seen as school leaders, they are also asked to take on additional stressful roles and are sometimes called upon to be unpaid "quasi-administration" helpers. Acting as administrators complicates the roles even further and contributes to the tensions inherent in their positions. Because of the "emotional

relationship kind of power” (as one counsellor noted) that exists between principals and their subordinates, counsellors may “shoulder” additional roles. Taking on administrative functions is another factor in creating the complex, ambiguous, and tension-ridden role of the counsellor. A finding of this study is that, in addition to a complex, ambiguous, and tension-ridden role, counsellors are asked to take on the role of principal or school leader. This is troublesome because counsellors are placed in the seemingly contradictory position of being student helpers and advocates as well as authoritarians or disciplinarians. These roles seem to be opposed philosophically and therefore may add tension or even confusion about the role.

It was clear through the data obtained in this study that counsellors believe their administrators do not know what the role of the counsellor is or that principals may have an unrealistic expectation of the counsellor’s role. Counsellors who also have teaching duties have additional strain placed upon them: One counsellor described being active in post-secondary activities such as career fairs or post-secondary professional development opportunities (as counsellors often are) but also being penalized for being absent from school as if their primary role was that of a teacher. This seems to place an unfair burden on the counsellor who wants to access opportunities that benefits students but also has teaching duties and should therefore not leave the school.

c) *There is ambiguity about communicating with students’ parents.* School counsellors are sometimes ambiguous in their role in communicating with parents. One participant shared an experience about calling social services because of a student’s abuse but then being harassed by the parent for doing so. Even when communicating with parents about suicide threats or issues of student self-harm, the guidelines are unclear:

What should counsellors do in cases where students are involved in self-harm but are not suicidal? Must counsellors call parents for students who are eighteen years old or older but are still students in school? Questions like these add to the lack of clarity in role expectations. Additionally, when students cannot access community supports for diagnoses or other assessments in a timely manner, the school counsellor is tasked with supporting these students. The need for accessibility of the high school counsellor for students who are either waiting for or are reluctant to access external supports is a finding of this research.

Counsellors may also be ambiguous in relation to helping Indigenous students navigate the barriers for post-secondary education. One counsellor observed that many Indigenous students, because of such barriers, don't further their education after high school. This is troubling because it highlights the additional barriers that Indigenous students face in pursuit of post-secondary education. Further, that a school counsellor observes this, this speaks to the counsellor's role in observing systemic inequities in education which, again, can contribute to stress and tension.

d) *Ambiguity is expressed as a challenge and a risk.* One of the findings of this research is that, while the rural counsellor-participants in this study were designated as career counsellors only, they still experience a significant amount of challenges, risk, ambiguity, and tension in their jobs. One counsellor spoke about being hesitant to offer advice to students because, should the counsellor's advice not merit results, the parents may confront the counsellor. Specifically disturbing is the counsellor's remarks that, "And they know where I live unfortunately, they very well know where I live..." This represents that, in a rural community, the counsellor may be under the gaze of students'

parents who place the burden of the future of their children on the school counsellor. It also speaks to the blurring of boundaries in rural practice where a parent might be a person that the counsellor has to interact with outside their professional role. Another rural counsellor spoke about being confronted by a “rude” parent and being in the “direct line of frustration” even though the counsellor had taken extra measures to help this parent’s child. Yet another rural counsellor spoke about being hesitant to give a personal opinion about a student’s post-secondary choices for worry that the counsellor’s views might not yield expected results. In this scenario, the counsellor might receive blame if the student’s post-secondary plans did not come to fruition.

Counsellors must judge just how seriously to take issues students bring to them. In doing so, one counsellor spoke about calling parents and being very frank with what was happening with their child. The counsellor’s role in deciding which steps to take in serious situations could represent multiple opportunities for error. This is represented by what one counsellor said: “Did I screw up anywhere?” Another spoke about “personal heartbreak” that counsellors face in helping others with trauma because the counsellors “carries” other people’s grief and trauma. The burden such judgments and grief or trauma have on school counsellors particularly when they are involved in life or death situations is indeed heavy and, according to one counsellor, exacts a “cost.” Support for the counsellors for their own grief or trauma may be absent altogether.

Counsellors spoke about the challenges in dealing with unsupportive parents and one counsellor spoke about students from group homes that are often moved elsewhere without the school knowing. Counsellors also spoke about the challenges or risks in relation to communicating with teachers. One participant spoke about working with

teachers who are “lovers of providing consequences” to students whereas a counsellor said, “What consequence could we possibly impose that could be more motivating than the consequence of their [the students’] difficult, difficult life?” According to the counsellor who made this statement, a teacher should not believe that levying consequences is a motivating factor to students whose lives outside of school are difficult. These two statements are evidence of the conflicting paradigms that exist between teachers and counsellors; however, school counsellors know personal and confidential details about students’ lives whereas classroom teachers may not. This means that classroom teachers may have very limited information about students’ personal lives and therefore appear to be impatient or harsh when there are student absences or incomplete assignments.

A particularly worrisome notion is that a school counsellor may feel that she or he may be “under fire” by colleagues “because I don’t have a schedule with kids in front of me” all the time. One participant reiterated the notion that as a result of not teaching classes, other duties are assigned which do not fit with the role. The counsellor may be open to “personally being attacked” by others and, most important, “...and whether or not I can keep my position because I advocate for kids and that doesn’t necessarily make a cheerleader for the institution or the people running it.” This statement brings up the uncomfortable reality that, within a counsellor’s advocacy work, others may be critical. “And when I’m having to go head-to-head about what happens for kids in the school division or a particular building, my job and my career are in question.” The fact that counsellors still advocate for or with students amidst such pressures makes their

advocacy work a courageous undertaking. As one counsellor also said, “Sometimes you’re never not going to piss somebody off in our job.”

Another ambiguous facet of school counsellors’ roles is that they face physical danger. Two counsellors reported taking weapons from students or knowing about students having firearms. A third counsellor spoke about having to act in the role of police officers during school safety drills: “We guidance counsellors were asked to be like police officers to go knock on doors and check rooms.” In this role they are in physical danger because they are expected to be in the hallways during crisis while teachers and students are behind the locked doors of the classroom.

In addition to the ambiguity of their role as perceived by themselves or others, counsellors are overwhelmed.

*Third topic: Being overwhelmed. Emerging theme: The demands on high school counsellors contribute to their sense of being overwhelmed.* Adding to the tension of the role of school counsellor is the notion that counsellors are often overwhelmed with numerous and unpredictable demands. Their days start early and end late and frequently they do not have the same lunch hour break that teachers have. One counsellor estimated that counsellors spend eighty percent of the time counselling students while the rest of their time is spent in meetings with teachers, parents, outside agency personnel as well as doing public relations-type duties. One counsellor spoke about worrying about her own memory loss because of the many demands that teachers make as the counsellor is going from the staffroom or washroom to the counselling office and is in the middle of other work; inevitably, some demands made on the counsellor are forgotten.

Counsellors reported having multiple students at their office upon arriving at work each morning. “I’m constantly running,” one counsellor said. Another said, “From the minute I drive up to the building, it can start in the parking lot, and it’s go...” This implies that counsellors are frequently approached by staff members in the teachers’ parking lot about issues related to students. This same counsellor spoke about opening emails at home prior to getting to work; the implication is that with so many demands and interruptions, the emails may not be opened in the course of a regular day.

Counsellors can be preoccupied and stressed because there are times, such as summer, when they may not be accessible to students. One counsellor shared that counsellors may worry that specific students were dead if not heard from over a period of time. The notion inherent in this statement is that the emotional toll on school counsellors is enormous if they are wondering if some students who are absent from school are dead because of their dangerous lifestyles. Add to this the emotional cost of worrying about suicidal students, counsellors clearly are overwhelmed with the welfare of students. Counsellors care about whether students are dead or alive; one counsellor began to weep in the research interview when talking about students who may not be safe or may not have shelter outside of school.

One counsellor said, “Everything comes to our doors.” Specific to this was the counsellor’s role in helping students with mental health needs such as anxiety, suicide ideation, and self-injury. Additionally, students may avoid school for mental health reasons. These issues overwhelm counsellors. “We’re the ones who are there twenty-four, well not twenty-four hours a day, but day in and day out.” This statement alludes to the relationship counsellors have with some students by being in the students’ every day

environment. One spoke about helping a student who was in foster care since grade nine and the pride that goes with seeing that student graduate. That counsellors may serve as *in loco parentis* is evident through this experience.

The counsellor who supported an entire school community after a student's suicide speaks to the overwhelming nature of this role as well as the notion that school communities may believe the counsellor is one who is best equipped to deal with grief. Even though emergency trauma teams are brought into a school for the immediate hours after a suicide, the school counsellor is the permanent mental health fixture in schools who remains long after the trauma teams leave. "That's all you're talking about for a year," the counsellor said, "and you have to do it all day, every single hour." It is particularly challenging when the school counsellor is also feeling grief, loss, and perhaps guilt over the loss of a student.

The next pre-eminent theme, presented in the section to follow, spoke to the frequency and intensity that high school counsellors are involved in the mental health of students.

*Fourth topic: Student mental health. Emerging theme: Counsellors revealed that they are front-line mental health workers in the lives of students.* Counsellor-participants reported that they perceive their role as working with students who have mental health needs. Because counsellors knew personal details of students, counsellors were aware of the connection between school absenteeism and student mental health. One counsellor said, "A lot of kids aren't coming [to school] because of mental health and addictions." While the role of school counsellor is not to offer students long-term mental health therapy, school counsellors are at the school where students are. One counsellor used the

term *triagings* which represents that counsellors may be so swamped with mental health needs along with their other roles they use a medical model to prioritize their functions. This occurs whether or not students have access to services outside of the school.

One counsellor spoke about the “fear” that other school professionals may have about the mental health needs of students. This participant sees part of the counsellor’s role as educating colleagues in the school about adolescent mental health. Another counsellor spoke about outside mental health workers who come into the schools to support students; however, particularly a troublesome comment made by this counsellor was that one of the support workers said, “If it’s an emergency, then they need to have the noose around their neck.” In other words, anything short of suicide should be taken care of by the school counsellor despite having the outside mental health resources, resources which may be stretched beyond capacity. Equally problematic was the notion that, because of the vastness of the mental health needs of students in the school, this counsellor had an appointment process and a waitlist: “I had kids waiting two to three weeks to get an appointment with me.”

There may be greater stigmas around mental health issues in rural communities. Although the rural counsellors stated they were to be career counsellors only, they are also thrust into the position of helping with mental health concerns because of the perceived stigma students or their families have about seeking mental health support in the community or the lack of mental health support in the community. Speaking of mental health issues, “It’s still taboo,” this participant said. This notion aligns with the assertions of Popadiuk (2013) who suggested that career counsellors may be well-situated to identify and help individuals who feel shame or stigma about mental health issues.

Additionally, Popadiuk said, “Researchers working in the field of vocational counselling have found that many career issues are related to serious psychological distress” (p. 365). As reported by the rural career counsellors in this study, there may be considerable stress experienced by students in relation to obtaining post-secondary counselling. There may likewise be considerable stress amongst the counsellors who fear their advice would not result in success and counsellors would be blamed.

In speaking about youth mental health issues, participants addressed specific mental health concerns:

a) *There is a high prevalence of counsellors working with student anxiety and/or depression.* High school counsellors routinely work with student anxiety and/or depression, whether diagnosed or not. One counsellor reported that a student survey found that youth anxiety and depression is on the rise. Counsellors spoke about students being so anxious they cannot work in a regular classroom; in cases such as these, the counsellor is accessed. In such cases school counsellors may work with groups of students, not just individual students.

b) *Counsellors intervene in student self-harm and suicide ideation.* School counsellors work with students who harm themselves. One participant noted that students who self-harm may not be suicidal, but counsellors also routinely work with students who have suicidal ideation and counsellors conduct suicide interventions. One counsellor noted that, while times such as Christmas should be a happy time, many students experience the stress of home dysfunction, addictions, and family violence. For such students, school may be their safe place and being released from school for the holidays adds to student stress and anxiety.

School counsellors who deal with suicidal students are tasked with calling parents. Often this call will result in students being hospitalized. The important point here is that counsellors are front-line youth mental health workers and are the first to notice extreme youth mental health crises. Additionally, counsellors work with students who have obsessive compulsive disorders and other very serious mental health issues such as students who hear voices.

c) *School counsellors save lives.* Two counsellors spoke about students who thanked them for saving their lives. Through the experiences these participants shared, students were aware of the integral role of the school counsellor at times of a potential life-or-death crisis. That high school counsellors can play such an important role in the mental health needs of students is a finding of this study.

d) *School counsellors do whatever it takes to help students.* One participant shared a detailed experience about helping a student despite the student's extreme anxiety. Through the failure of one plan after another to both coax the student into the school and help him start academic work, it was clear the counsellor kept searching for new solutions to help the student. The counsellor said, "I will just keep changing the plan until it works." It is curious to me that a school counsellor is persistent in helping just one student when the findings of this study indicate that there is often only one counsellor for hundreds of students, perhaps even up to 500 students.

e) *Counsellors advocate for the mental health issues of students.* Because the topic of counsellors appealing to teachers to advocate for students was spoken about multiple times by numerous study participants, it provides a salient finding of this study. Here again counsellors advocate for students, in this case because of the mental health

needs of students. One counsellor spoke particularly about the role that trauma plays in students' lives because of abusive homes, poverty, or a refugee status. "Schools are, for the most part, not very trauma-sensitive," this participant said. This statement implies that, because the wider school is not trauma-sensitive, the school counsellor deals with issues of trauma.

*Fifth topic: Parental communication. Emerging theme: Counsellors revealed that they routinely communicate with students' parents or guardians.* Counsellor-participants reported that they regularly speak with parents about the academic and/or social-emotional wellbeing of students. Counsellors are sensitive to the challenges of communicating with parents about difficulties their children are experiencing. Counsellors will call parents about student substance-use, mental health concerns, or to report to parents that their children may be exhibiting suicide ideation. As a result of their calls, high school counsellors are frequently front-line workers in assisting students to access mental health services or be hospitalized for their care and protection.

Communicating with parents is a time-consuming activity for counsellors. Face-to-face meetings frequently follow phone conversations which can take up to an hour for each parental meeting. Additionally, counsellors counsel parents; one counsellor spoke about "consoling" a parent during a face-to-face meeting. This implies that the skill set that school counsellors have in counselling are used to help students *and* parents.

There are times, however, when parents are aggressive towards the counsellor. One participant in this study reported, "The parent just wanted to attack me...parents don't like it when their dirty laundry gets exposed at school." Another said, "...and we're the ones the parents lash out at." Others reported that their calls to parents

frequently bring troublesome news to parents which are the reasons parents react with frustration or anger.

A counsellor reported that parents may not realize that they, too, have a part to play in the academic choices students make. Some parents may leave the onus for academic or post-secondary guidance solely in the hands of the school counsellor.

*Sixth topic: Unpredictable days. Emerging theme: Counsellors revealed that their days are unpredictable with no set hours or breaks.* A further finding of this study is that a school counsellor's days can be unpredictable. Counsellors reported starting early in the morning and having "unplannable" days which include numerous meetings. While there may be quiet days, there also are days "where the world was falling apart." A veteran counsellor observed that more and more issues seem to be brought to the counsellor's office than ever before. This is further evidence that neither the counsellors nor other school personnel may be clear about what the role of the counsellor is and is evidence of either the lack of resources for youth in the community or the youths' inability or unwillingness to access the available resources.

*Seventh topic: Collaboration. Emerging theme: Counsellors collaborate with in-school personnel and external community professionals for the wellbeing of students.* Counsellor-participants reported that they routinely collaborate with in-school administrators and, additionally, collaborate with professionals in the wider community. Counsellors have a unique relationship with their principals: Counsellors speak to their principals about student issues and counsellors frequently are consulted by principals. One participant said, "...my admin just asks me for the answers and I just tell them and they deal with it."

Counsellors also spoke about how they support other professionals in the community. One participant said, “You’re support for the child and family support worker” and another said, “There’s challenges with communicating with government youth services...they are so overwhelmed...there’s not enough resources for these kids.” This statement implies that, due to the lack of resources for mental health for youth in the community, school counsellors may face an ever-increasing role in providing personal or mental health assistance for students. After all, school counsellors are there, at the school, where the students are at. They are visible and easily accessible to students, their parents, and the school community. There is no extra cost to see a school counsellor and school counsellors are usually available upon very short notice.

In addition to collaborating with principals and community professionals for the wellbeing of students, school counsellors also support in-school staff. This is the next thematic item.

*Eighth topic: Staff support. Emerging theme: In addition to providing support for students, counsellors also support their in-school colleagues.* One counsellor said, “And teachers, too, need a lot of support.” Counsellors reported that they may be the “first line” to offer support to teachers and, further, may even serve as advocates for the teacher. “So sometimes advocating for their needs, that they have a classroom of thirty-five students and a full range of needs of students and they need support, too.” One counsellor reported, “There were three teachers waiting at the end of the day to see me,” and another reported supporting the entire school learning support teams. This is another finding of this study: School counsellors perceive their role as supporting students,

supporting parents, supporting in-school administrators, supporting community professionals who deal with youth, and, additionally, supporting teachers.

Counsellors were asked to “take the place of an administrator” and may check students’ belongings for contraband. Because of their school-wide vision and non-teaching duties, counsellors were asked to help out in administrative tasks for, as one counsellor said, “I’m easy to cover off and I have a really good general student population understanding.”

*Ninth topic: Crisis. Emerging theme: Counsellors revealed that they are front-line workers during times of crisis or crisis drills.* Counsellors deal with “life-threatening” issues such as missing students. Counsellors involve the police or social services in serious student disclosures. In addition to their own role, school counsellors carry out the role of police for school safety drills: They are “like police officers to go knock on doors and check rooms.” This places counsellors in potential danger while other school professionals are hidden behind locked doors.

Because of the varied, complex, and competing tensions inherent in their perceived roles, counsellors are also aware of the necessity for their own self-care, which is the last theme included in the overall typology, *tension inherent in counsellors’ roles*.

*Tenth topic: Self-care. Emerging theme: Some counsellors are aware of the necessity for self-care.* The issue of self-care was mentioned by only a small number of counsellors. Although they were not asked directly about self-care, they volunteered that it is an important element of their role. One spoke of “keeping up” as a form of self-care; however, the absent narratives on the issue of self-care is perhaps the most striking finding within this thematic category.

There were two additional issues spoken about by participants which indicates that school counsellors are in a position to observe systemic injustices: One counsellor's concern was that a food donation given to the school does not go to the students who are hungry but rather to the more elite students in a special program in an "unintentional" way. The participant's concern may be indicative by a hegemonic understanding whereby the society-at-large places more value on those who are visible achievers rather than those who are invisible and impoverished. Counsellors interviewed for this research spoke clearly about observing students in differing socioeconomic classes or noticing students who live in poverty.

An additional counsellor stated that the rural community had not adopted an inclusive attitude for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youth and expressed concern that LGBT youths may be marginalized because of the small rural school environment in which they live and go to school. These two examples imply that counsellors observe and take note of social injustice within their own school or school community. Sometimes they are in a position to advocate for or with youth in the face of such injustices and sometimes they are not; however, the salient notion is that they observe and may internalize such injustices. This may add complexity to their tension-ridden roles.

The second typology (the first being *tension inherent in counsellors' roles*) is more descriptive in nature and describes the participants' perceptions of their role which did not embed complex or competing tensions. This includes the single theme of student support and is addressed in the section which is to follow.

*Second typology: School counsellors support students.* It is a finding of this study that school counsellors perceive their role as being supporters of high school students in ways that do not result in inherent complex or competing tensions. This is not to say that tension is absent altogether but rather to illustrate that, in comparison to the complex and competing tensions raised in the first typology such as issues of mental health, counsellors also have tasks which are not as tension-filled.

Counsellors support students in their academic success and in their transitions to post-graduation work or post-secondary education. They do class schedule changes, help with various applications, and are integral members of attendance or achievement team meetings with other in-school personnel. Counsellors also help students with credit attainment or credit recovery. One said, “So at the end of the semester, we’re desperately trying to get kids to fifty [per cent].” This finding opposes the common assumption that counsellors are not involved in the academic program of the school whatsoever, or that they’re merely on the margins of the academic program offering other kinds of support to student. The data collected from this study indicates counsellors are highly involved with the academic progress of students (“I will flip over backwards inside out and upside down to help a kid be successful and it takes every single second you have”), perhaps because all counsellors who participated in this study were certified teachers. One participant specifically spoke about helping a student academically as “a lovely way of getting into counselling...kids who are reluctant to come and talk to someone.”

Counsellors perform a myriad of mundane tasks such as posting student announcements or going into classrooms to make presentations about student

opportunities beyond graduation. Their role requires routine paperwork or, as one participant said, “administrivia.”

The aforementioned analysis of data obtained through interviewing high school counsellors gives thick description to their role. A further analytic measure was to examine my own critical reflections based on the collected data. These reflections are presented in the next section.

### **What is Going on Here? My Reflection on the Findings**

Corbin (2017) suggested that a grounded theorist may ask the question, “What is going on here?” (p. 302). Although this research was not a grounded theory study but borrowed principles from grounded theory, this question bears consideration. In reference to the contribution of grounded theory, Charmaz (2010) claimed, “The social world is always in process, and the lives of the research subjects shift and change as their circumstances and themselves change” (p. 195). I recognize the participants’ interviews offered only a temporal glimpse into their perceptions of their role; however, the most profound themes gleaned from their narratives warrant further researcher comment. The experiences of the research participants as well as the researcher matter in qualitative research (Kovach, 2009). In the following section, I have synthesized my own knowledge and experience with the participants’ comments to bring to light a deeper understanding of their complex and at times conflicting role.

*Reflections about the tension of the role.* A salient finding of this study is that high school counsellors function much of the time with internal personal and professional tension of which teachers and principals may be unaware. Counsellors seem unsure of what their job title should be: *Guidance counsellor* represents an antiquated discourse

whereby counsellors guide students only in vocational or post-secondary issues while *school counsellor* is a title that is currently held by social workers who counsel students in some schools.

Once again the concept of a school counsellor's bounds of competence may need to be addressed in relation to the tension embedded in their role. In dealing with a multitude of serious issues, mental health issues taking priority, do school counsellors operate outside their bounds of competence? When a student is waiting for mental health services in the community but relies upon the school counsellor for daily support, does the counsellor function outside of her or his bounds of competence in trying to assist the student? While it is true that high school counsellors are trained for supportive counselling, does their training prepare them for complex issues that should be addressed in a therapeutic environment? Is doing something better than doing nothing in all cases? These are issues which still puzzle me.

***Reflections about counsellors' advocacy practice.*** It is evident through the findings in this study that high school counsellors intentionally or unintentionally advocate for and with students in order to ensure a student's academic, social, or mental health wellbeing. There is considerable tension in counsellors' advocacy practices because, using Durkheim's paradigm of how social structures (such as schools and school divisions) function, counsellors are placed in a dual complexity of working for both students and the employing school division. In further reference to Durkheim's theory of morality, counsellors may even be tasked with upholding and enforcing the social morality of the secular institution, the school. They experience tension in their advocacy role because they are expected to respect and abide by the routines, practices, and

procedures of the school at times when they feel these elements work in conflicting ways in the lives of students.

Counsellors frequently spoke about their advocacy practices as potentially conflictual with their teacher colleagues, administrators, and parents; counsellors reported they are frequently the intermediary helper between students and teachers and even students and their parents. Counsellors' hands are tied in respect to the confidentiality they must respect for students yet they must appeal to teachers for assignment extensions and other areas in which students may be in conflict with teachers. Counsellors also appeal with their principals to not impose punitive measures upon students such as school suspensions. In the social function of the school, principals are seen to be the supervisor. Counsellors therefore find themselves frequently in conflict or tension with their immediate supervisor in their advocacy practices for students because what counsellors feel is best for students may not align with the hegemonic structure of the school.

That counsellors reported advocating for Indigenous students to receive band funding for post-secondary education is also a finding of this research. This means that counsellors had to potentially negotiate with political structures they were not part of and therefore counsellors experienced tension as a result. It appears that not all school divisions or schools have protocols in place to communicate with First Nations bands on behalf of students; therefore, this necessary work is picked up by counsellors. This is troubling for two reasons: First, because it may represent a discourse that the functioning structures of schools do not acknowledge that an added measure for Indigenous students' post-secondary funding is necessary or important and, second, that school counsellors

observe what needs to be done on the behalf of students and are lone agents in advocating for students.

One counsellor gave a long narrative about *not* being able to advocate for a student with exceptionalities. It is curious to me that the counsellor not only felt tension in regards to the *one size fits all* policies and procedures which are in place for students who are identified as breaking the rules, but the stress that a counsellor may feel at being the solitary voice who would have advocated for the student. This incident further speaks to the structural functional nature of schools where regulations are in place to endorse a complex moral conviction which assumes adults are always on the side of right.

***Reflections about counsellors' work with immigrant or refugee students.***

Counsellors who work with students who are immigrants or refugees frequently perceive issues of undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Former child soldiers, civil war survivors, and victims of female genital mutilation are students in our current school systems in this prairie province. Counsellors frequently worry that a fire alarm will send former students of warfare into states reminiscent of past wartime conflicts. What is most concerning, however, is the vicarious trauma that counsellors experience in working with these children because the horrors counsellors hear about through the students are unimaginable. Once again, issues related to high school counsellors' bounds of competence may be raised through their counselling activities in relation to such issues. Ideally, issues of extreme trauma should be referred to mental health professionals with specific trauma-related education and experience, but this may or may not happen. In some jurisdictions, high school counsellors receive supervisory support by registered psychologists; however, the data collected for this research did not indicate this is the

case. Additionally, where or how counsellors access support for their own emotional needs is questionable; further, counsellors may not wish to appear to others as weak should they feel the need to access support for themselves.

***Reflections about the ambiguity of their role.*** A major finding of this research is that counsellors are ambiguous about their role. Their role is negotiated within their school bounds and may even be contested by their colleagues. They are uncomfortable when they perceive that others, such as teachers, are judgmental of the role and believe that the counsellor's job may be easy because they do not have teaching duties. Further, because counsellors do not have clear role definitions they, too, may be unsure of their exact role and take on anything and everything that comes through their doors.

Administrators, unsure of the counsellor's role, may assign miscellaneous duties, even clerical duties, to the school counsellor. This is concerning because counsellors feel duty-bound to do what is asked of them and frequently feel conflicted because they know what is being asked of them is neither typical of their role nor in the best interests of students.

***Reflections about expectations of student confidentiality.*** The tension counsellors feel in relation to the expectation of student confidentiality is extreme because, in the absence of role specificity, they assume or are instructed by a job description to keep everything confidential. They often live in a grey area whereby they release some information to teachers and administrators with the view that students will receive fairer treatment; however, they feel a sense of tension or guilt when doing so because they may have violated the ambivalent expectations about confidentiality. The notion that a school counsellor must keep all matters relating to students in strict

confidence is problematic for a number of reasons: There may be occasions when information about a specific student should be shared with other professionals within the school for the wellbeing of the student. Secondly, I wonder about the emotional fatigue that counsellors bear in relation to being the only ones with specific confidential information about students and the ethical landscape of making decisions which impact students without consultation with others.

*Reflections about counsellors' role as school leaders.* Counsellors may be seen by teachers to be school leaders and are often asked to fill in for absent school administrators. What is troubling about this is the assumption that counsellors are available to act in this role because they may not have teaching duties; this assumption trumps the question of whether counsellors are or are not suited to an administrative role. This further emphasizes that many are unsure of the school counsellor's role.

*Reflections about counsellors' role as mental health workers.* My own experience as a school counsellor and the experience of my research participants attest to the fact that high school counsellors are front-line mental health workers with both diagnosed or undiagnosed anxiety and depression ranking the issues they deal with most frequently. Counsellors are physically housed in the school where the students are and are easily accessible and available; external supports are at times burdensome and untimely for students and their families to access. Additionally, school counsellors provide students support for undiagnosed mental disorders such as social phobias which directly impact pedagogy and learning environments. The prevalence of student self-harm and suicide ideation and threats are commonplace issues in which counsellors are involved. They also deal with student addictions and the aftermath of family violence.

The mental health work high school counsellors conduct for or with students is embedded in the complex notion that they may sometimes see only the students who have mental health needs or who are in crisis. This may lead to an unsubstantiated assumption that many or most students have mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. I wonder if this places school counsellors at a disadvantage compared to their teacher colleagues who may encounter students who do *not* have mental health issues as well as those who do.

The mental health work counsellors do for and with students should be acknowledged and understood by in-school administrators and employing school divisions. I believe that this notion, more than any other, is where the changing face of the role of counsellor lies; therefore, I have proposed specific recommendations about their mental health role further in this chapter.

***Reflections about counsellors' role in support of their colleagues.*** Counsellors reported offering emotional support for their teacher colleagues. In my experience, counselling teachers has been rewarding although it may not have been a part of my role or job expectations. Just as school counsellors are accessible and available to students, they are accessible and available to teachers. This may speak to their trust in their school counsellor colleagues or their unwillingness or their lack of knowledge to access external supports. It may, however, also speak to the increasing burdens that are also being placed on teachers as a result of continued provincial funding cutbacks and more diverse student and parental needs in their classrooms.

***Reflections about the notion that counsellors may sometimes be in danger.*** Counsellors are also front-line crisis responders and may at times be in physical danger

because of student weapon-related offences or potential intruders in the school building. That they are expected to fulfill this role is troublesome because it speaks to the dubious or absent actual role description. Rather than a mechanism through which to define and clarify their role, counsellors are subject to hidden expectations. It can be said that the social system of the school operates with unspecified paradigms which may impact even the physical safety of its employees.

*Are all high school counsellors caring individuals?* It is clear to me that all twelve counsellor-participants who volunteered for this research were caring and compassionate individuals. It may be precisely because of their passion for their role that they volunteered for this research. I wonder, however, if all school counsellors are as caring as the participants appeared to be in this study.

While the research findings have now been analyzed and discussed, it may likewise be prudent to discuss what was *not* found in this study. My own lived experience as a high school counsellor informs both the absent and salient findings.

### **Potential Counsellor Roles that did not Surface as a Result of this Study**

As a practicing high school counsellor, I drew from Yin's (2014) suggestion that my own expert knowledge was to partly inform this study. To that end, I have contemplated my own awareness of what participants in this study said and did *not* say. Participants did not report on all aspects of their role. I framed the semi-structured interview questions around the perceived roles of high school counsellors; had I asked for responses on the issues counsellors regularly deal with in their work, different data would have been obtained. The salient findings of the scope of this research, therefore, were the perceptions counsellors have about their *role*, not the specific *issues* school counsellors

encounter in their day-to-day practice. Taking this into account, the following summary may inform this research further by offering what was left unsaid by participants:

The issue of student bullying was not mentioned and social media was mentioned only infrequently. While the issue of online bullying or other forms of bullying as it effects students may be frequently cited in the international literature (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008; Bhat, 2008; Lund, Blake, Ewing, & Banks, 2012; Nordahl, Beran, & Dittrick, 2013), the counsellor-participants for this study did not mention it.

Substance use and addictions were mentioned only infrequently. One counsellor said, “I wish our addictions counsellor was in our school more.” That more counsellors did not mention substance use or addiction work in their interviews was a surprising result of this study. An explanation for the lack of data about substance use issues is that the urban counsellors who volunteered for this research were assisted by external alcohol and drug counsellors who came into the schools to work with students. If this were not so, I anticipate that the issue of substance use counselling may have been spoken of more frequently by the participants. Additionally, the interview questions did not ask for data specific to substance or addiction issues.

Counsellors in this study did not speak about working with students who have been sexually assaulted. This aligns with the suggestion that adolescent sexual assault survivors tend to receive assistance from friends or family members (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2013).

Only one counsellor spoke about counselling students with an eating disorder or *disordered eating*, a term used in the literature about abnormal eating patterns (Carney &

Scott, 2012). Bardick et al. (2004) suggested that adolescent eating disorders, namely bulimia and anorexia (Bardick et al., 2000; Manley, Rickson, & Standeven, 2000), may be considered as a form of slow suicide. Considering that suicide intervention was a role articulated by counsellors seven times in this present study, it was surprising that eating disorders did not surface more frequently.

Student smoking was not mentioned by counsellors in this study. Student smoking is an issue for many reasons, not the least is in regards to the academic functioning of students: Students who smoke between classes are frequently late to their next class and therefore are sent by teachers to the counsellor's office for late entry slips.

The topic of school counsellors' involvement with youth who have been sentenced by the justice system did not surface in this study. While there is a body of research which discusses issues of sentenced youth in Canada specifically as it relates to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (see Alvi, 2015; Mann, 2014; Quinn & Shera, 2009), there appears to be a paucity of research related to how school counsellors work with sentenced youth in schools.

### **Recommendations**

The position of high school counsellor is ambiguous. While the term *guidance counsellor* refers to a school counsellor who guides students mainly for vocational or post-secondary reasons, it does not fit with the nature of current role in its varied functions. It is therefore a recommendation of this research that a more suitable title relating to the front-line mental health support high school counsellors give to students is allocated. It may not be viable for province-wide agreement on the title of the position because the position clearly differs from one school division to the next; therefore, I

propose that each school division examine the role of the high school counsellor and derive a title for the position based on a more accurate reflection of what the role is which may acknowledge the mental health work high school counsellors do in their role. I also recommend that the role of counsellor be defined and separated to include academic school counsellors versus mental health school, social, and emotional counsellors. Because many school divisions use the term *counsellor* to refer to work which is conducted by social workers, I recommend that the term *academic advisor* refers to those who advise for academic, post-secondary, or vocational purposes and *personal counsellor* be used to refer to those who counsel for personal or social-emotional issues. Inherent in this recommendation is the notion that the two roles should be staffed with two separate professionals who have specific training related to their roles in addition to a professional degree.

The tension experienced by high school counsellors and reported through these research findings may be alleviated through the creation of an overarching code of ethics specific to this profession. All counsellors who participated in this research were teachers and were therefore bound to the *Code of Ethics* as determined by their provincial teacher organization; however, this code may not address specific issues in which counsellors find themselves. Further, it is not currently a requirement that high school counsellors have membership in governing bodies that regulate their profession. It is a recommendation of this research that a provincial body which oversees and supports high school counsellors and which has a clear ethical code may be a robust step towards reducing the complex ambiguity and tension spoken of by research participants. Additionally, employing school divisions may consider setting limits on school

counsellor practice because it appears that occasions regularly surface which require the counsellor to work outside of her or his bounds of competence.

Within the recommended code of ethics specific to high school counsellors, it is also recommended that there be clear guidelines for the confidential handling of information relating to students and their families and when exceptions to confidentiality need to be made. This recommendation rests on the notion that school counsellors function in the unique environment of the school and that counsellor-client confidentiality which exists in private practice counselling may not be the best model for school counsellors.

I also recommend that school divisions recognize that high school counsellors require frequent emotional support because of the serious nature of the student issues they deal with. Along with this notion is a recommendation that schools become more trauma-informed places whereby trauma education and support is available to all professionals including school counsellors.

A further suggestion is that school divisions recognize that high school counsellors may be in situations where they can be harmed physically either by students, parents, or intruders into the school building. I recommend that school divisions acknowledge the unique role of the school counsellor who is on the front-line of crisis and ensure there are protocols in place for the protection of counsellors in such situations.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Throughout the course of reporting, analyzing, and discussing data from this study, several areas were noted which may inform further research. They are summarized and discussed below and are absent of a hierarchical order.

**Counsellors fulfill multiple roles.** The role of the counsellor may be a “catch all,” a phrase used by one counsellor-participant, whereby anyone who doesn’t know what to do with a particular issue or situation sends it to the school counsellor. School counsellors may be asked to take on additional duties to compensate for other understaffed positions in the school. The non-counselling tasks of school counsellors may therefore be investigated through further research.

**Counsellors are not long-term helpers.** Counsellors who respond to social-emotional or personal issues may place themselves in the position of providing long-term care. In an American study of school counsellors, Carlson and Kees (2013) stated, “School counselors feel they are qualified to provide mental health counseling to students but that the nature of their job precludes them from doing so on a large scale” (p. 218). It would be an erroneous assumption to think that school counsellors who have a master of education degree and therefore education in school counselling beyond that of typical teacher education are mental health therapists. Education which is lacking in a practicum placement in a mental health facility or clinical supervision may not prepare counsellors for therapeutic work. Additionally, the duration and depth of counselling in the school counsellor-student relationship may be worthy of further research.

**Reported roles for female versus male counsellors.** That ten female and two male counsellors participated in this study aligns with other school counsellor research which also reported more female than male respondents (see Brown et al., 2006; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Kalkan & Demir, 2015). Some literature exists which suggests that students may prefer female school counsellors to male (Cooper, 2006; Quinn & Chan, 2009), but female counsellors may be asked to carry out duties not consistent with the

role of school counsellor such as clerical tasks, substitute teaching, and administrative roles (Bryant & Constantine, 2006).

A school counsellor's sense of being overwhelmed may have a gender basis: Bryant and Constantine (2006) noted, "The majority of school counselors in the United States are women, which makes the population of women school counselors particularly vulnerable to issues of professional fatigue and burnout" (p. 265). This is not to suggest that women counsellors are weaker than their male counterparts, but rather the reality that female school counsellors' roles may have more demands or may be perceived as having less importance than other positions in the school (Bryant & Constantine, 2006). This area is worthy of further investigation.

**Counsellors in physical danger.** Two counsellors reported being directly involved with students who had weapons. Further research might explore how high school counsellors face and deal with physical danger as a result of their role.

**EAL students and issues related to school counselling.** Several school counsellors in this present study spoke about counselling EAL students and spoke about the trauma many immigrants or refugees experience. This topic may warrant further Canadian research for, as Popadiuk and Marshall (2011) stated, "From a research perspective, there is a distinct lack of research focused on EAL adolescent international students in secondary schools and counselling issues" (p. 221). The recognition of the substantial EAL student populations in the schools of the participants in this study plus the projections for future school population demographics suggest this area may benefit by further research.

**Rural versus urban mental health stigma.** The concern that rural students or their community sense a stigma about receiving mental health care presents an opportunity for further investigation. Even though this area is addressed in the literature (see Hartman et al., 2013; Waddell, 2007), further exploration may shed light on whether there is a distinct difference between rural and urban communities in how people view mental health needs and care. As one rural counsellor said, “Mental health issues are totally not allowed.” This statement is balanced by the statements made by urban counsellors who reported arranging appointments for students outside of the school building without a stigma about mental health.

**High school counsellors collaborate with other professionals.** School counsellors may collaborate with internal school personnel and external professionals in the wider community. Brown et al. (2006) spoke about “multisystems collaboration” (p. 332) between school counsellors and other mental health specialists. The researchers concluded that the school counsellor’s role as referral agent may be either unrecognized by other school professionals, such as the principal, or underutilized as the “pivotal role” (p. 334) that it is. How counsellors collaborate with other professionals may be a topic for further research.

**The dual role of teacher and counsellor.** Some counsellors who participated in this study reported having teaching duties in addition to their role as counsellor. This notion has not been explored thoroughly in the academic school counselling discourse (Akos, Schuldt, & Walendin, 2009). While DeKruyf et al. (2013) stated, “a number of reasons support a professional identity that embraces the conjoint roles of educational leader and mental health professional,” (p. 273), there appears to be no literature which

has examined the dual role of school counsellors who have teaching duties. This may therefore represent an implication for further research. Keats and Laitsch (2010) claimed this dual role may create complexities in relation to counsellor role preparation and practice.

**School counsellor self-care.** One counsellor-participant in this present study spoke at length about self-care. While Figley (2002) described “compassion fatigue” (p. 12) in relation to counselling and Hamilton (2008) spoke about the “emotional availability” (p. 9) of counsellors, the topic of school counsellor self-care may draw considerable attention in the school counselling discourse if researched further. Because school counsellors are seen as solution agents, they may be hesitant to reflect on their own self-perceived weaknesses. As has been already stated, they may work outside of their bounds of competence. They may not want to present themselves in a pathological light so as to appear weaker in their ability to help others.

**Counsellors’ experiences of trauma.** Several counsellors spoke about immigrant or refugee students and their experiences of trauma. Trauma exposure can impact the personal and academic functions of youth and may impair their psycho-social development (Mathews, 2011). In their work with immigrant or refugee youth, school counsellors may play a key role in helping newcomers to be resilient in the face of trauma and to assist with Canadian-born students to negotiate shared spaces (Stewart, 2014). School counsellors may be well-situated to assist students who experience trauma as a result of witnessing war. “The people who support children from war-affected countries are those who take the time to personally connect with the student and who exhibit perseverance, patience, and kindness” (Stewart, 2012, p. 184).

The concept of “vicarious trauma” (Blome & Safadi, 2016) is linked to “compassion fatigue” (Figley, 2002, p. 12) which was also explored in Chapter Two, *Review of the Literature*. It refers to social and emotional workers’ distress in relation to working empathetically with individuals who have traumatic backgrounds. “Through hearing the traumatized client’s story, the worker experiences the trauma indirectly” (Blome & Safadi, 2016, p. 237). School counsellors who work with refugee students, child abuse or neglect victims, and other traumatized individuals may be susceptible to experiencing vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue.

Related to vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue are issues of school counsellor burnout. Hamilton (2008) suggested burnout is a “state of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion” (p. 12) that school counsellors may feel as a result of their work. Counsellors may feel a sense of burnout in dealing with a multitude of burdensome tasks in their daily role (Butler & Constantine, 2005).

**A teacher versus counselling paradigm.** A salient issue presented in this current study is that all the counsellor-participants were certified as teachers first. Many of them spoke about “teaching” self-advocacy skills to students and going into classrooms to present information or teach the *Friends* program, a proactive mental health program which is taught in classrooms. An issue that may be worthy of further investigation is the paradigm upon which school counsellors function insofar as being teachers or counsellors. A paradigm of teaching may mean that school counsellors, in helping students, teach students as a way towards wellbeing. A counselling paradigm may suggest that school counsellors involve students in therapeutic techniques towards wellbeing.

**An asset versus deficit school counsellor paradigm.** Although not explicitly stated in this present study by research participants, the researcher puzzled about the difference in school counselling discourse between an asset or deficit view of working with students and their families. The seeds of this notion may have started to germinate in the review of the literature when I learned that, in the early twentieth century, schools were places where youth could be *adjusted*, a term used in the mental hygiene era. Particularly bothersome was the notion that students of immigrant families needed social regulation through schooling. This gives rise to the question about whether current school counsellors use an asset or deficit approach in their work.

**School counsellor effectiveness as perceived by students and their families.**

Although there appears to be considerable research associated with how school counsellors perceive various issues or how other school personnel perceive school counsellors, there appears to be insufficient literature regarding how students and parents view the school counsellor. This may present an opportunity for further research.

**Not enough community mental health supports for youth.** The school counsellors who were participants in this study suggested that there are not enough mental health supports in the community for youth who either require such supports or who are in crisis. Manion (2009) suggested that, in Canada, “It is time that child and youth mental health be recognised as the health priority that it truly is” (p. 50). While there is a broad base of literature devoted to this topic (see Davidson & Manion, 1996; Findlay & Sunderland, 2014; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007), an implication for future research may be how school counsellors view and utilize community mental health supports for youth.

**How school counsellors support students through grief.** Two counsellors in this present study reported helping students at times of grief. The school counsellor grief counselling literature appears to be limited; Jones (1977) provided a study which connects the role of the school counsellor to grief counselling. Further investigation into the school counsellor's role in grief counselling may be of interest for future research.

**How school counsellors support students from Indigenous families.** Both rural and urban counsellors who participated in this study described working with Indigenous youth. Their concerns were that Indigenous youth may not receive support from their communities to attend post-secondary institutions or that the schools in which the counsellors worked were not sensitive to the needs of Indigenous students. Future research may look at how school counsellors in Canada work with Indigenous youth. Another area which may be considered for future research is the notion that the lives of students of Indigenous heritage may be scrutinized more than non-Indigenous students, even beyond their high school years.

**How schools support trauma-informed practices.** The high school counsellors who participated in this study did not speak about paradigms of support which exist in their schools in relation to student trauma. Wiest-Stevenson and Lee (2016) supported a "trauma-informed school model" (p. 500) whereby a school-wide plan is implemented to support a safe school. Under this model, administrators take the lead in supporting staff and students who have experienced trauma. Activities that foster a trauma-informed school involve the maintenance of a normal routine, allowing students choice where appropriate, providing additional support staff for traumatized students, observing factors in the school ecosystem which may re-traumatize individuals, and understanding trauma

risk factors (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016, p. 501). How schools in Canada may facilitate trauma-informed practices may be a topic worthy of future research.

### **Concluding Comments**

Reflecting back on Fitch's (1935) American study of vocational counsellors (as explored in Chapter Two, *Review of the Literature*), it appears as though present-day Canadian counsellors carry out many of the same functions as did the counsellors cited in the 1935 study (who were surveyed between 1928 and 1934). Administrative duties, case work, conferences with teachers, parents, and students, coordinating with outside agencies, counselling for educational, vocation, and health needs, supervision, working with health problems and students with special needs, collecting and disseminating information, record keeping, and scholarship activities are all activities spoken of by the school counsellors in 1935 as well as the school counsellors in this present study. What is different, however, is that current high school counsellors perceive their role to have significant tension and ambiguity. Present-day counsellors feel conflicted about their role and are frequently at odds with the demands placed upon them by their administrators, colleagues, and even by students' parents. Within the school and systemic structures in which they must work, counsellors feel torn between their role as employees and their role as advocates for and with students, specifically when both roles seem to have opposing interests.

One significant finding from this research was that high school counsellors are front-line mental health workers in the lives of students and assist during times of crisis. They save student lives through routine suicide interventions.

This study has demonstrated that the current roles of high school counsellors are considerably different from the historical construction of vocational and personal *guidance counsellors*. What has emerged from this study is the need to critically reconceptualise the role of the contemporary counsellor and to have the complexity and tensions of these roles acknowledged, understood, and appreciated by the educational establishment.

It was both an implicit and explicit understanding from this research that counsellors perceived their roles as challenging but they also have tremendous gratitude for their positions. They spoke with passion about and commitment to their roles and the students whom they serve.

I will forever feel honoured to have been amongst their company.

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## Appendix B

### Information for Prospective Research Participants



#### **FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH & GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada S4S 0A2

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<http://education.uregina.ca/edgrad/>

### Information for Prospective Research Participants

*How do high school counsellors perceive and practice their role and responsibilities?*

*Proposed research:* The purpose of this research is to collect and analyze narrative and textual data relating to how high school counsellors perceive and practice their role and responsibilities. The research will be reported in a PhD dissertation by education psychology candidate Sharlene McGowan of the University of Regina.

Research participants are asked to participate in two ways: First, by participating in an individual interview session of 90 minutes. During the interview participants will be asked to describe their role and responsibilities as school counsellors and their perspectives about their work. Secondly, each participant will be asked to record their experiences and reflections about their role and experiences in a personal and reflective electronic journal over a four-week period. These experiences and reflections could include their perceptions, practice, actions, and reactions to situations that arise concerning students (and by extension students' families as well as the school's staff and administration). All electronic journals will be submitted by the participants to the researcher at the end of a four-week period in one of two ways: first, by password-

protected email or (if participants are uncertain of email security) through Dropbox accounts that are accessed only by individual participants and the researcher. Likewise, participants will be able to communicate with the researcher through password-protected email or individual participant-researcher Dropbox accounts. If participants choose to submit their journals via email, the journals will be stored in the researcher's personal computer which is password-protected. Both participants and researcher will ensure that no identifying information is recorded in the electronic journals. To ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, participants will be identified by numbers such as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so forth. The school divisions and names of schools where the participants are employed will not be identified.

Individual interviews will occur at a neutral, non-school location, such as a meeting room at a public library as mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher. The individual interviews will be audiotaped by the researcher; however, the voices on the tape will not be identified and the data will be reported in a non-attributional way even though verbatim remarks may be used in data reporting. No one other than the researcher will have access to the audiotape and it will be locked in a secure location until the completion of the research project. Once the research project is completed, the researcher will employ a professional service to destroy the audiotapes.

Once the study has ended, analysis and results will be documented in a dissertation. Each participant will be sent an electronic copy of the summary of results or dissertation should they request it. Additionally, the results from this research may be communicated through journal articles as submitted by the researcher or conference proceedings as led by the researcher.

Potential research participants will be drawn from three separate school divisions: (Information removed by researcher to help protect participant confidentiality and anonymity.) Accessing participants from three school divisions may ensure greater anonymity for participants; data will be reported in such a way that neither a specific school counsellor nor a specific school division will be identifiable. Participants will be allowed the opportunity to review and verify the interview transcripts; the researcher will omit or amend the transcript to each participant's agreement. The researcher, Sharlene McGowan, is also a high school counsellor and may be a colleague of research participants; therefore, please understand that participation in this research is voluntary.

Participants will have the right to withdraw from this research project prior to submitting their four-week electronic journal to the researcher (which will occur after the individual interview). Participants may not withdraw once the electronic journals have been submitted because data analysis may have already occurred.

The researcher has received approval from the University of Regina's Research Ethics Board for this research.

If you, as a high school counsellor, wish to participate in this research, please email Shar McGowan at \_\_\_\_\_ or text at XXX XXX XXXX. When doing so, please use your private (not work) email address.

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent and Transcript Release



#### **FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

#### **OFFICE OF RESEARCH & GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

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Phone: 306.585.4502 Fax: 306.585.5387

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**Project Title:** *How do High School Counsellors Perceive and Practice Their Role and Responsibilities?*

**Researcher:** Sharlene McGowan, Faculty of Graduate Studies and research, PhD candidate, Educational Psychology, University of Regina. (**email address**) XXX-XXX-XXXX

**Supervisors:** Dr. James McNinch, Faculty of Education, XXX-XXX-XXXX, [James.McNinch@uregina.ca](mailto:James.McNinch@uregina.ca), Dr. JoLee Sasakamoose, Faculty of Education, XXX-XXX-XXXX, [Jolee.Sasakamoose@uregina.ca](mailto:Jolee.Sasakamoose@uregina.ca)

#### **Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- This research is in fulfillment of the partial requirements for the PhD degree in Educational Psychology for the researcher, Sharlene McGowan.
- The objective of the research is to contribute to a current understanding about the role and responsibilities of high school counsellors in Canada.

**Procedures:** The purpose of this case study research is to gain first-hand experiences of twelve high school counsellors about their current role and responsibilities. Three methods of data collection will be used in this research: 1. There will be one 90-minute audio-recorded individual interview that responds to interview questions. 2. Each participant will be asked to record their experiences and reflections about their role and

experiences in a personal and reflective electronic journal over a four-week period.

These journals will be used as a form of data for the research. 3. Document analysis of texts from organizations that oversee the work of school counsellors will also be used to collect and code data.

Individual interviews will occur at a mutually convenient time and location that ensures participant anonymity and confidentiality.

**Confidentiality:** Research participants will have their confidentiality protected by use of an assigned number for each participant (*Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3*).

In addition, because all of the participants share worklife characteristics (all are high school counsellors) and three school divisions are represented, the anonymity of individuals is further protected. The only exception to anonymity is the researcher will know who her research subjects are. Both participant anonymity and confidentiality is of the utmost importance to the integrity of this research as well as the comfort of the research participants.

**Storage of Data:** The individual interview conversations will be audiotaped by the researcher; however, the voices on the tape will not be identified. The data will be reported in an anonymous way but verbatim remarks may be reflected in the reporting of data and dissertation. The audio recordings of the interviews will be heard and transcribed only by the researcher and will be stored in a locked location; the data storage of the transcription will also be secure using a locked computer. Data will be stored for five years to respect the University of Regina policy on the storage and destruction of data. The electronic journals (using Microsoft Word) will be sent to the researcher after a

four-week journaling period without identifying information and will be stored in a password-protected personal computer.

**Right to Withdraw:** Participants will have the right to withdraw from this research project prior to submitting their four-week electronic journal to the researcher (which will occur after the individual interview). Participants may not withdraw once the electronic journals have been submitted because data analysis may have already occurred.

**Follow up:** The researcher will share the individual interview transcript by password-protected email or individual, secure Dropbox accounts to all participants and participants will be asked to verify the accuracy of the content. In addition, participants will have the opportunity to make additional comments.

**Questions or Concerns:**

- Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1 if you have questions or concerns about your participation in this research. Participating in this research is entirely voluntary.
- This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board on February 24, 2016. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (306-585-4775) or [research.ethics@uregina.ca](mailto:research.ethics@uregina.ca).

**Signed Consent:** Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided:

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project by participating in one 90-minute individual interview and a four-week reflective journal exercise. I understand that the individual interview sessions will be audiotaped and I understand that the data, including verbatim data, will be used in the research in an anonymous and confidential

way. I am discouraged from disclosing the contents of the discussion to anyone other than the researcher.

A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

**Transcript Release (to be signed after participants have received and approved the transcript of their interview):** I have reviewed the complete transcript of my input into the data collected for this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in the individual interview session with Sharlene McGowan. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Sharlene McGowan to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

## Appendix D

### The Interview Guide

Question 1: Tell me about your background and experience.

*Possible prompts:*

*Describe your gender and ethnicity.*

Question 2: Please describe the school in which you work.

*Possible prompts:*

*Describe your student population.*

*Tell me about the staffing in your school.*

*What would you say is the counsellor-student ratio in your school?*

*What would you say are your school's best qualities?*

*What are some challenges in your school?*

Question 3: Describe your role and responsibilities.

*Possible prompts:*

*Describe a typical  
day.*

*What does a typical week look like?*

*Describe how your responsibilities differ depending on the time of year.*

*How are your roles and responsibilities  
determined?*

*Does someone else, such as an administrator or school division, communicate  
your roles and responsibilities to you?*

*Can you describe, in as much detail as possible, any interactions with students or  
their families that are particularly meaningful to you or have impacted you in either a  
positive or negative way?*

Question 4: *Option 1* (if participants have already referred to an example of advocacy:

You have talked about situations in which you seem to be advocating for a student. Can you please expand on that aspect of your role?

*Option 2* (if participants have not yet included an example of advocacy): Are there times when you feel you have served as an advocate for a student? Tell me about those times.

*Possible prompts:*

*Tell me about a time when advocated for or with a student.*

*What does advocating for and with students mean to you?*

*What necessitates advocacy work?*

*Do you advocate for and with students intentionally or do you summarize your activities*

*in working with students as advocacy in hindsight?*

*How much of your professional practice would you say is involved in advocacy work?*

Question 5: What challenges or risks do you encounter in your practice?

*Possible prompts:*

*What is the greatest personal challenge or risk you face regularly in your role as school counsellor?*

*How do you reconcile or resolve challenges or risks?*

## Appendix E

### Sample Letter to School Divisions Asking for High School Counsellor Job Descriptions

(Date)

Human Resources  
(School Division)

Dear Sir or Madam,

As an educational psychology PhD Candidate at the University of Regina, I will be conducting research related to the roles and responsibilities of high school counsellors.

I am therefore requesting a copy of the job description your school division has in place for current and future high school counsellors. This information will help inform the data that is collected as part of this research.

The proposed research has passed ethics approval on February 24, 2016.

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact either me or the co-supervisors for this study, Dr. James McNinch (James.McNinch@uregina.ca) or Dr. JoLee Sasakamoose (JoLee.Sasakamoose@uregina.ca).

I wish to thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Sharlene McGowan