


A Transcendental Phenomenology of School Counselors' Lived Experiences Transforming Remote Counseling Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Taneshia Greenidge¹ , Sondra Smith-Adcock², Huzeyfe Cakmakci³, and Yi-Wen Su⁴ 

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore school counselors' experiences migrating counseling services online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 school counselors with a focus on the use of technology and transformative practices. Findings of the study included five composite themes: (a) changes in school counseling services using technology; (b) reaching families for equity; (c) changes in relationship with stakeholders; (d) school counselors' adjustment to grief, loss, and role confusion; and (e) positive outcomes for the future. We discuss the essence of the lived experience and implications for school counselors.

Keywords

school counseling, COVID-19, technology, virtual counseling, online counseling

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020 (WHO, 2020b). On March 10, 2020, WHO declared the novel COVID-19 disease to be a global pandemic (WHO, 2020a). In April 2020, schools were closed nationwide in 188 countries and over 90% of students were affected, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021). Before the end of March, all 50 U.S. states and all U.S. territories reported at least one case of COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 Response Team, 2020). Many state and federal authorities issued stay-at-home orders that required school closures to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus and increase health care capacity (Schuchat, 2020). As a result, most school systems in the United States experienced disruption to in-person learning (Kuhfeld et al., 2020), with school districts instantly transitioning to online instruction (Lake & Dusseault, 2020) and continuing remotely through much of the following school year. These nationwide school closures also took many students away from necessary educational and school-based services (Golberstein et al., 2019; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020), including access to school counseling services.

Following the sudden shift to remote learning and school closures, recent reports suggested that learning losses disproportionately disadvantaged students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color (Goldhaber et al., 2022;

Parolin & Lee, 2021). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2021), not all students are equally able to access remote classrooms. Unsurprisingly, prepandemic data showed that internet access was lowest in families with children aged 3–18 with household incomes in the lowest income quarter (NCES, n.d.), and this digital divide would have been similar when the pandemic began. Furthermore, the pandemic exposed inequities that existed across families and communities, as students' caregivers worked to support their online learning while also navigating employment loss, COVID-19 illnesses, and other pandemic-related hardships (Davis et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Thus, school counselors were called not only to help manage the migration to online learning platforms but to find ways to help bridge the inequities faced by families who were more negatively impacted by the pandemic to a disproportionate degree.

When crises occur, school counselors take on a leadership role to provide effective counseling services and crisis response

¹University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA

²University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

³Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA, USA

⁴Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA

Corresponding Author:

Taneshia Greenidge, University of Memphis, 3798 Walker Ave, Memphis, TN 38111, USA.

Email: tgrnidge@memphis.edu

(American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019b; Donohue et al., 2015; Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2018; Springer et al., 2020). However, a crisis of the proportion of the COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge. As educational leaders, school counselors were also positioned to transform their use of available informational and educational technologies to meet the needs of students and their school communities. According to transformative leadership scholars, crises provide an opportunity to change current practices to better address educational inequities through finding exceptions to usual practice and developing new programs and partnerships (Noguera, 2016; Shields et al., 2018; Strear et al., 2019). Specifically, transformative school counselors are educational leaders who, when called to action, modify existing counseling programs to meet the academic achievement needs of diverse students according to racial, cultural, gender, and social class group differences (Shields et al., 2018; Stone & Dahir, 2015; Strear et al., 2019). Using transformative school counseling as a framework, an important consideration is how school counselors managed the COVID-19 pandemic and whether their experiences during this challenging time can be understood to transform existing school counseling programs, especially related to their use of technology to deliver counseling programs remotely, and to address issues related to equitable learning opportunities.

School Counseling Practices in Technology and Remote Counseling

Even before the pandemic hit, school counselors were increasingly expected to integrate technology into their practices with students and other stakeholders. In 2017, ASCA published two relevant position statements. The first, *The School Counselor and Student Safety and the Use of Technology* (ASCA, 2017a), urges school counselors to use technology with students to promote healthy student development and digital literacy. The second, *The School Counselor and Virtual School Counseling* (ASCA, 2017b), outlines expectations for and the ethics of providing online/virtual counseling programs for students engaged in online learning platforms. Prior to the pandemic, several authors suggested that school counselors use technologies to support program delivery (Glasheen et al., 2013; Goodrich et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2019). Although scholars have long encouraged school counselors to integrate technology into their practices, only a few studies have explored how much and toward what purposes school counselors use technology in comprehensive school counseling programs (Mason et al., 2019; Steele et al., 2014).

When the pandemic necessitated a virtual migration, a sizable gap existed in the literature regarding the use of technology to deliver remote school counseling services. According to prior studies, although school counselors generally perceive the use of technology positively, they are less sure about how to use it and report relatively low levels of technology use considering its wide availability (Anni et al., 2018; Glasheen et al., 2013;

Steele et al., 2014). For example, Glasheen and colleagues (2013) found that school counselors ($N = 210$) held positive perceptions about online counseling; however, they were concerned about students being authentic in remote sessions and the ethical and legal implications of online counseling. Similarly, Steele et al. (2014) examined how often school counselors used technologies in their comprehensive school counseling programs. Steele et al. found that 28% of the 771 school counselors studied used technologies to deliver school counseling services, including classroom lessons; 28% used technology to perform student planning tasks, such as appraisals and advising; and about one in four (26%) provided remote counseling sessions. Based on research conducted prior to the pandemic, scholars have shared school counselors' positive perceptions concerning technology use, but also point to a relatively low level of use among school counselors and a lack of comfort with online counseling. Taken together, the state of the relevant research and the crisis of the recent pandemic suggest an urgent need for thorough examination of school counselors' technology use to deliver counseling services, especially during times of crisis.

For school counselors, using technology to communicate and collaborate with families was unavoidable during the pandemic. The pandemic shift to remote learning was harder to navigate for families from lower economic circumstances than for families from higher socioeconomic statuses who were not facing as many hardships. (Catalano et al., 2021; Dunton et al., 2020; Golberstein et al., 2019; Karpman et al., 2020). In particular, families with younger children were charged with being directly involved in their children's school day in ways for which they were unprepared (Davis et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). These hardships also fell disproportionately on low-income Black and Hispanic parents (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Karpman et al., 2020; Parolin & Lee, 2021). Even during noncrisis periods, partnering with families can be particularly challenging when families are marginalized and existing practices are inadequate to manage the social and economic disparities that impact families' and schools' ability to work together (Amatea et al., 2006; Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Bryan et al., 2019; Bryan & Henry, 2012). Studies related to school counselors' use of technology to bridge this divide and improve family-school partnerships are rare. However, a pre-pandemic survey of 87 school counselors examined their use of technology to reach families remotely. In that study, Cronin et al. (2018) found that the use of technology (e.g., web platforms, phone applications, text messaging) was positively related to school counselors' attitudes toward family-school partnerships. School counselors who prioritize family-school relationships are also likely to employ technology in their work. Although the pandemic was unexpected and unfortunate, school counselors had little choice but to quickly innovate and expand the use of technology to engage students and their families. The school counseling profession can benefit from understanding what they did and learn from their experiences.

Transformative School Counseling for Educational Equity

Modeled on school reform efforts in the 21st century, transformed school counseling practices have focused on leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change (Education Trust, 2009; Shields et al., 2018). According to transformative school counseling scholars, school counselors act as change agents and transform school counseling programs to help students achieve success in academics and social/emotional development (Stone & Dahir, 2015; Shields et al., 2018; Strear et al., 2019). The transformative leadership role of school counselors is clearly aligned with the mission to address educational equity issues for all students (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; ASCA, 2018; Dollarhide et al., 2008). For example, ASCA's position statement *The School Counselor and Equity for All Students* (2018) posits that school counselors are responsible for developing and implementing a school counseling program that is based on promoting equity and access for all students, including closing opportunity gaps, advocating for underrepresented groups, and maintaining professional knowledge around the complex interpersonal world of students. Educational inequalities between high- and low-income students and students of color were well documented prior to the pandemic (Duncan et al., 2017; Potter & Morris, 2017; Ziol-Guest & Lee, 2016) and were exacerbated by learning losses during the pandemic (Doyle, 2020; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Parolin & Lee, 2021). Transforming school counseling practices means that counselors act as change agents and school leaders who rise to meet such complex challenges on a daily basis to promote student achievement and close the opportunity gap to create socially just educational environments (Shields et al., 2018; Stone & Dahir, 2015). Thus, addressing educational inequities challenged school counselors' leadership roles both during the pandemic's school closures and in its immediate aftermath.

As a framework, transformative leadership situates school counselors as equity-centered agents of change helping those around them recognize, reframe, and take responsibility for transforming educational inequities (Shields et al., 2018; Strear et al., 2019). Shields and colleagues (2018) used transformative leadership as a framework for comprehensive school counseling programs. Using this model, Strear et al. (2019) examined a professional development activity based on transformative leadership and educational equity for school counselors. However, neither of these prior examples was situated contextually during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Stone and Dahir (2015), transforming school counseling models also means that counselors embrace change and continuously work toward improvement in school counseling programs. Therefore, improvements in school counseling programming may emerge from times of crisis when current practices are tested and new models are needed. The COVID-19 pandemic offered such an opportunity for school counselors to not just rise to the challenge presented by the pandemic, but to create transformed ways to meet the

educational and social/emotional needs of students and families during unprecedented times.

Drawing from a transformative school counseling lens and using transcendental phenomenology as a qualitative approach, our purpose in the current study was to explore the ways school counselors managed the online migration of counseling services during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this information can be used to strengthen equity-centered school counseling programs. Given the lack of research exploring how school counselors use technology to deliver counseling programs, and specifically how they use technology to reach families, we were interested in hearing from counselors about how they navigated the sudden need to move online when COVID-19 necessitated an abrupt turn to online program delivery. How did school counselors navigate this change? How did they reach families? How did they change their comprehensive programs to help students and families? Because of our focus on transformative school counseling, a primary emphasis for us was to ask school counselors about their experiences migrating to virtual spaces, and how their experiences were transformative, changing and even improving current practices.

The following research question guided the study: During the COVID-19 pandemic, what were school counselors' lived experiences and how did the use of technology transform counseling and related services for students and families?

Method

We conducted a transcendental phenomenological study to explore how school counselors experienced connecting with students and their families virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. Transcendental phenomenology was particularly appropriate for the study given its focus on describing the essential experiences of the participants when a phenomenon is newly explored (Moustakas, 1994). We conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom with 14 school counselors. Semistructured interviews were chosen to allow participants to expand on their thoughts and discuss relevant experiences, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs related to the topic of interest (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Further, DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) suggested that semistructured interviews are an effective method for data collection when the researcher wants (a) to collect qualitative, open-ended data; (b) to explore participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic; and (c) to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues. Semistructured interviews allowed participants an inviting space in which to express their thoughts and feelings about the pandemic, strategies used to conduct virtual counseling services, and how they transformed their programming.

Participants

Fourteen K–12 school counselors in the United States participated in this study. All had a minimum of 3 years of school counseling experience and transitioned to a remote format in the

2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. The school counselors' years of experience ranged from 4 to 26 years ($M = 8.64$). Study participants were in locations across the United States, with the majority in the South ($n = 7$) and Midwest ($n = 6$), and one participant in the Northeast. Most of the school counselors worked in suburban environments ($n = 9$). Thirteen participants identified as female and one as male; nine participants identified as white, four as African American, and one as multiracial. Regarding grade level, six participants reported working in elementary school, 10 in middle school, and nine in high school. Some participants chose to endorse multiple grade levels based on the grade levels of their school (e.g., K–8). We use participant pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Data Collection Procedures

Our research team received institutional review board approval prior to recruiting participants and adhered to all relevant ethical codes in conducting this study. A recruitment letter was sent through the CESNET email list and various university alumni email groups. From the initial recruitment letter, 15 participants contacted us to express interest in the study. One participant did not respond to a follow-up email. We then sent the 14 participants a Qualtrics survey to review the informed consent, complete the demographics survey, and verify that they met the inclusion criteria, including being credentialed, working in a K–12 school setting in the United States for a minimum of 3 years, and, based on their own report, having relevant experiences transitioning school counseling-related tasks to a virtual format. For this study no participants were screened out. We chose to seek participants with a minimum of 3 years of experience because this seems sufficient time for school counselors to implement a comprehensive school counseling program and learn their school communities. We recorded interviews using Zoom, which was password protected, transcribed using online software, and carefully checked for accuracy. Most interviews lasted approximately an hour, with the shortest lasting about 30 minutes and the longest being a little over an hour. We asked each participant 10 questions, with follow-up questions to explore their experiences. Sample questions include “What were your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic at your school?” and “How did you deliver your school counseling services during COVID-19 pandemic?” The complete list of questions is in the [appendix](#).

Data Analysis

The dataset for this study was de-identified prior to data analysis. Through data analysis, we sought to make meaning of participants' experience with a unique phenomenon and to reduce individual experiences to grasp the very essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). Our team of four researchers analyzed interview transcripts using Moustakas' (1994) coding stages: phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and

synthesizing meanings and essences. Following Moustakas' first stage, phenomenological reduction, we first independently read transcripts and coded interviews to yield an initial set of horizons for each participant's interview. Horizons are units of meaning that are coded to help reduce and manage a large amount of data (Moustakas, 1994). We worked in coding teams to create descriptions of participants' experiences that reflected that individual's experiences, and then compiled and organized themes that were similar across participants. This coding procedure results in a set of composite textural themes, or a coherent description of the experience across participants (Moustakas, 1994). To confirm the composite themes, we used extensive word-coding of interviews and kept data trails during this coding procedure.

In the second phase of data analysis, imaginative variation, we worked together in several coding meetings to synthesize the deeper meanings of the school counselors' accounts and to create composite structural themes that described the underlying meanings and essences of the experience across participants. We then further synthesized the meanings and essences into a cogent essence statement. The composite themes from this study are presented in the findings section, followed by an essence statement that describes the very essence of school counselors' lived experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we followed a methodology that supports the aim of the study and used rigorous data collection and analysis process relevant to the research design. Transferability to school counselors across the United States is supported because we interviewed a diverse set of counselors from different settings and backgrounds and had a robust sample size for the qualitative design. However, we acknowledge the findings may be particularly representative of the experiences of school counselors working in the South and Midwest and in suburban settings. To further ensure trustworthiness, our team members conducted rigorous checking of each other's coding of the horizons and used research team discussions to finalize composite themes. We discussed themes until consensus was reached and the essence of the experience fully reflected the school counselors' stories.

Subjectivity Statement

Our research team is diverse, including a Black woman of Caribbean American descent, an Asian woman with an international identity from Taiwan, a White woman of American descent, and a Turkish man. Although from different backgrounds, we are all currently counselor educators with a degree in school counseling and prior experience counseling in school settings. Some of us have international experience in school counseling, and we have all worked as counselors in schools in the United States. Each of us has prior school counseling experience consistent with transformative leadership and has adopted it as part of our counseling identity. As counselor educators during the pandemic, we each had to transition to online platforms and use technology to conduct teaching in our

respective school counseling graduate programs. Although none of us currently holds a school counseling position, we keep current on use of technology in counseling through our instructional roles. Prior to conducting the study, we were curious about what school counselors were doing during the pandemic that would help to inform future school counseling practices. Two of us were field placement coordinators at the time and were hearing stories about the challenges school counselors were facing and the impact school closures had on counselors, interns, and communities. We had a specific concern about how school counselors were engaging students and their families during a difficult time. Because of our own experiences, we may have held prior assumptions of which we were unaware, and these assumptions may be unintentionally demonstrated in our study findings. We tried to account for any biases by allowing the data to speak for itself. As a team, we also made sure to hold each other accountable by having open discussions about the data collection and data analysis procedures.

Findings

The study findings are presented in five composite themes that reflect school counselors' experiences as a whole: (a) changes in school counseling services using technology; (b) reaching families for equity; (c) changes in relationship with stakeholders; (d) school counselors' adjustment to grief, loss, and role confusion; and (e) positive outcomes for the future.

Changes in School Counseling Services Using Technology

School counselors expressed how they transitioned the most critical counseling services online to meet students' and families' needs. They described working quickly to resume essential counseling services using available technology, working through the ambiguity, being flexible and creative, and finding ways to get in touch with students and families. Many school counselors described using Zoom, Flipgrid, Canvas, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet as platforms, and reported calling and emailing as ways to contact families. For example, Timothy, who worked in a middle school, said, "It helped us think a little bit more creatively about how we can reach kids. The biggest one being on Canvas. . . . We got creative with how we can put on activities for the students." Katlyn described: "We created an online check-in that we emailed to each of our caseloads. We put it on the school website and on our online platform." Quinn said, "I do more invitations, you know, I am constantly on Canvas inviting them to speak with me to see me. Like I said, I made a video to encourage mental health awareness and effective communication."

School counselors also felt that they had many challenges to overcome in migrating counseling services online, and often faced ambiguity associated with the transition. Timothy discussed moving counseling lessons online:

Our district uses Canvas, but we never had any training on Canvas as counselors that was kind of like on your own. So, we started doing that as well. Trying to put stuff on there so that we could use it in the future. . . . If you weren't good at technology then it was hard for you to do your work effectively.

Jasmine expressed initial feelings of anxiety:

I know I had a lot of anxiety because I was just like, if there's no kids here, how am I going to do my job? I was making phone calls home, and I was making sure kids have devices. I was making sure that families had resources on getting like, you know, internet and letting them know where to get free internet. We had to do a lot of IEP, 504 and meetings like through Zoom or Google.

According to the school counselors, meeting basic and social/emotional needs became a priority for families and students, and school engagement became secondary. As Brianna, an elementary school counselor, stated, "Obviously many more social and emotional issues came up as we went online." Most counselors described a change in the connection that they had with students during the pandemic. In some cases, the relationship was as strong or stronger, and in other situations, the pandemic made reaching some students more difficult. Theresa shared: "I did not have the connections with my students that I was used to even though I offered lunch chats three times a week, and then I also sent out a weekly Google form check-in twice a week to them." Cassandra discussed her "open-door" policy:

A lot of the kids are used to just literally being able to walk in guidance because I have free time during lunch. . . . I open my door and whoever comes in comes in. So that was something that they missed because they knew during lunch it was their free time to come without an appointment.

In summary, with counseling services shifted online and school closures, school counselors noticed changes in the needs of the students and worked to meet the needs. Interviews with counselors documented an ambiguous time in which students' counseling needs shifted, so school counselors quickly improvised to use available technologies to reach students.

Reaching Families for Equity

School counselors observed a divide in resources between families and worked to help them obtain the resources they needed. Participants reported trying to find resources for students who did not have the adequate technology to continue their education remotely. The school counselors also talked about helping families meet basic needs, such as providing food.

In regard to students' access to technology, Cassandra stated, "Some of the things we just didn't notice because we didn't have

to, we didn't have to know if they had internet at home because we have computers that can use after school." Brianna shared:

We had instances where sometimes admin went to kids' houses to double-check on people. And for marginalized students, we were able to get certain families internet hotspots to get them internet. We helped families with food and supplies for people who lost jobs. I'm just thinking, I had like one student in particular who never showed up to class. She never showed up to counseling and it was just like constantly having to call. . . . Like we're hoping we see her tomorrow or what can we help with that's going to help her get online.

Kelly said, "Because of COVID, I've done a lot more trainings and there have been some things like equity work that have given me a couple 'a-ha' moments and I sat on some equity committees." Acknowledging the trauma that many students and families were going through, Kelly also sought

to just make sure that we're providing the students the trauma support that they need when these events happen, you know, in the world. And then it comes to school and then you have to adjust and live in that, and are we prepared to handle that in the way that we need to.

Karisa also mentioned that the "confluence of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have really brought home the digital inequalities and the access inequalities that face many of my families."

Both Katlyn and Jennifer spoke about getting food to families. According to Katlyn, "so whenever we would struggle, like getting in touch with a family by phone, a lot of times we could be on that bus route to deliver food and then talk to the family that way." Similarly, Jennifer said,

Do they know where they can get food? So, we would send out an email blast to parents. These are the sites that are offering food. These are the times that you could go, we would take that information posted on Instagram so that it could be easily shared and on Facebook.

In summary, school counselors recognized differences in families' resources and reached out with access to internet and, in some cases, helped with basic needs. Participants stated that a primary role was to keep families connected to the school and children engaged, acknowledging the difficulties many families were facing.

Changes in Relationship With Stakeholders

The school counselors focused on how their relationships with different stakeholders changed during the pandemic, including families, students, school administration, and community partners. Some participants discussed how the pandemic helped stakeholders to see the counselor's role differently and gain a

better understanding and appreciation of what school counselors do. Other participants discussed families feeling comfortable reaching out to the school counselor and getting involved in new ways.

Some families found the pandemic helped them to see how much of an important part of their school the counselors were and how much they admired what they did. As Leslie described:

I would say strengthen (referring to the relationship between the counselor and families). I think they were more appreciative of what we were doing. . . . So I feel like they're more appreciative, more grateful and like more trusting of the school right now.

Other positive changes discussed were parents/caregivers expressing their personal counseling needs, an increase in communication/contact with families, caregivers' attendance in meetings, and supporting or creating a stronger connection with other school counselors. Leslie stated:

We [the school counselors in the district] . . . worked together. We were told to do these things [curriculums during the transition to online] together, which was brilliant and helpful. They [the school board] were trying to make it easy on us. And it did, as well as create more positive relationships among the buildings [the different schools in the district].

Participants also discussed other changes in family involvement during the pandemic. Jessica described her relationship to families:

It was kind of nice to know that the families also felt comfortable to like reach out and say, "Hey, I really need your help. You know, I'm really struggling . . . what is your recommendation? What can we do? How can I help them?"

Theresa stated:

Initially they [families] were more involved because they didn't really know what to expect. And then as time went on their involvement decreased and we were having to reach out to them more. So, I was making at least 30 to 50 phone calls a day to students and parents trying to get them back engaged in e-learning.

On reflection, the school counselors saw different ways that their relationships with stakeholders changed, mostly for the positive.

School Counselors' Adjustment to Grief, Loss, and Role Confusion

The school counselors navigated role confusion and the grief and loss that came with the pandemic. They discussed being flexible and having to negotiate boundaries they faced, from not knowing when to end their workdays to families and students

contacting them at all hours of the day. Participants also said they had increased workloads and decreased amounts of time to complete tasks. They discussed enduring negativity from others and how they still managed to be resilient despite these views. For example, Theresa stated, “And even with all the negativity of social media and the community . . . people saying you’re not doing enough, or you’re not doing this or doing that, nobody ever gave up and just walked away from it.” Related to resilience, Theresa further stated, “I just think that across the board, given the circumstances, I think everybody did the best they could.”

To navigate new work-life boundaries, Brandy shared: “I felt like I worked from the minute I woke up till 10 o’clock at night. So much so that my head of school was like, ‘You need to stop sending emails so late.’” Kelly summed up her experience similarly:

You just feel like, you have to be at every training and I just feel like my calendar filled up so quickly. There would be days I would be on Zoom all day. But I also had children that were at home that were supposed to be doing school.

The school counselors also expressed the adjustment they experienced in a different way and discussed how they managed their emotional responses to the loss of interacting with their students and not being able to fulfill certain parts of their job. Karisa stated, “So, I felt good about my day in and day out, running into kids in the hallways, and being in their classrooms. I miss that, so dreadfully. I feel very disconnected from just the pulse of things.” Some school counselors expressed sadness around not being able to provide counseling services in ways they previously had. Quinn stated, “My office is a safe haven for my students and I can’t provide that for them anymore at this time.” Karisa shared: “I just missed being with people, those everyday interactions.” Lacey reported that the experience was emotional for her:

I’m getting emotional, like I miss the kids and I know that they miss us and the support that we give. And I think before, you’re able to have that relationship and it’s about just loving the kids, you know, giving them that extra layer of support.

Brianna shared:

I think you hear this a lot. Like that social piece really fell short for a lot of kids. And those nuanced social interactions that they have throughout the day were gone and a lot of kids were hit really, really hard by that. And so it was always trying to come up with ways of like, how do we get kids to like to interact still and like have that like normalcy of school over the computer?

The participants discussed how the pandemic caused a shift in their role as a school counselor and confronted what their role was supposed to look like during this time. Timothy stated:

We spent a lot of time just figuring out, like, what is our new role and how does that function? Can we see students online? What’s confidentiality? What does the district support or want us to do or not want us to do? So, it was a lot of confusion and like lack of direction.

Although role confusion affected many of the school counselors, Timothy also discussed a renewed appreciation for his role:

It definitely made me appreciate my position, my role and my job . . . but it just made me appreciate that whole going into work every day, seeing the kids every day, having my office, having coworkers that I can see and talk to and the connections, I guess the human connection, it made me really appreciate it.

For the school counselors, a common experience during school closures was adjusting to their personal feelings of loss and isolation and adjusting to the new roles they found themselves in.

Positive Outcomes for the Future

For the school counselors, their experience during the pandemic fostered changes in their programs that they will implement for the future. Participants discussed continuing the use of online platforms, improved communication strategies with families, updates to crisis plans, and becoming more proactive. Participants also discussed ways the pandemic opened their eyes to positive and negative errors in their system and ways to improve counseling programs in the future. Karisa proposed:

Having a plan, a plan, a plan [to manage a crisis, like the pandemic]. I’ve got a plan for fire drills. I have a plan for active shooters. I have a plan for everything. I have a plan for when a faculty member dies. I know what to do in all of those circumstances.

Brandy discussed a positive discovery from the pandemic: “It was eye-opening that virtual counseling can be effective and it’s totally different, but you can teach from home and you can be an effective school counselor virtually.”

Most of the school counselors found improved ways to reach out to families using available technologies that they would continue after the pandemic. Jessica described:

So, if you’re having like a parent meeting and you want to have that face-to-face connection and parents aren’t able to come, but also maybe not necessarily live streaming yet, maybe recording it, maybe having them log in through zoom so that they can feel like they’re present.

Relating to a barrier that most counselors faced communicating with families, Jessica also said, “I think one thing that we could all improve on is making sure they have reliable phone numbers, email addresses for students and parents.” Most

participants found that the use of technology and online platforms were beneficial. Timothy stated:

I definitely think going full out on making the school counseling lessons and such on Canvas, like that has to be a given that all your materials are there. Not only because it's accessible to the students, but it's also accessible to you wherever you are. . . . Using the announcement feature is a great way to communicate with students. But then also encouraging parents.

Karisa shared:

Continuing to utilize the Classroom Dojo and Google classrooms to send information out digitally to parents, I will continue to do that. Our school has a Classroom Dojo account and when I would send stuff out that way, I'd get sometimes 300 parents who looked at it. So, if I had 300 parents look at something, whether or not they actually went through the whole thing, but at least they clicked on it. That's huge.

Last, the school counselors were proactive and found areas where change was needed. Brianna summed it up this way:

I'd like for all of our teachers and staff to be trained in managing crises . . . first aid training for everybody. But truly like seeing how trauma affects kids or affects adults and affects your relationship with kids. As we're still living in a pandemic, we're all I think kind of in crisis at different times. And I would like to see more . . . allowing me more space and opportunity . . . to kind of do what I know how to do and support staff and offer workshops on meditation or . . . relieving stress or maybe starting a book club or something. I'd like to see more of us taking care of each other.

Quinn expressed a desire for "more effective communication, at least with staff." Their experiences during the pandemic made this a major area of concern for the future. Brianna asked: "How am I going to continue to support teachers and students and families on this grander scale now that we've all kind of gone through something and we're having to recover from it?" Having shared a crisis experience together, the participants found a major takeaway of improved ways to connect to each other, families, students, and teachers.

The Essence of the Experience

During the pandemic, school counselors effectively used available and improvised technologies to stay connected with students and their families, and thus responded to changes in student's needs and made needed shifts in counseling services. Although counselors had to adjust to not having the same access to their students as they were used to, they found new ways to connect with each other, families, students, teachers, and staff. They navigated changes in their relationships that, for the most part, left school counselors feeling valued. For the future, school counselors saw a need for increased use of technology and more

intentionality in crisis planning. Participants related gratitude for their experiences during the pandemic that opened their eyes to new ways to get families involved, new ways to use technology to reach a larger number of people, and ways that virtual counseling programs can work. As a whole, the school counselors gained valued insight and ways to transform their counseling programs.

Discussion

Using a transcendental qualitative method and a transformative school counseling lens, the current study generated findings that contribute to an emerging knowledge base regarding how school counselors' experiences transitioning to remote programming during the COVID-19 pandemic may transform school counseling programs. *ASCA (2017b)* has called for school counselors to use technology to meet the demands of diverse school communities, and the pandemic provided a new context for delivery of school counseling programs remotely. Therefore, findings of the current study add to literature on school counselors' technology use and transformative leadership.

The current findings extend existing research related to school counselors' understanding of and effective use of technology (*Anni et al., 2018; Glasheen et al., 2013; Steele et al., 2014*). Although research prior to the pandemic suggested that few school counselors consistently use technology to deliver counseling services (*Anni et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2019; Steele et al., 2014*) and that many have concerns about online counseling (*Glasheen et al., 2013*), the pandemic necessitated that school counselors migrate as much of their school counseling programs as possible to online formats. For example, in *Glasheen's* study, only about one in four school counselors were using technology in their school counseling programs. In contrast to some prior findings that showed school counselors had concerns about counseling online (*Glasheen et al., 2013; Steele et al., 2014*), counselors in the current study suggested that they gained more efficacy in delivering online counseling programming in response to the crisis than before the pandemic.

Our study findings also contribute to the literature related to the use of technology specifically in engaging with families. Similar to *Cronin et al.'s (2018)* study, which showed a positive relationship between school counselors' use of technology and family-school partnerships, school counselors in our study used multiple platforms (such as Classroom Dojo and Canvas) and strategies to support families. School counselors also noted that families and parents were reaching out more frequently to them for help and improvements in their family-school relationships. Given the financial and emotional hardships faced by families during the pandemic (*Catalano et al., 2021; Dunton et al., 2020; Golberstein et al., 2019; Karpman et al., 2020*), school counselors led the way in helping families find instrumental and emotional support. Using equity-focused strategies consistent with prior recommendations (*Amatea et al., 2006; Bryan et al., 2019;*

Bryan & Henry, 2012), school counselors coordinated services throughout their communities to help balance the needs of families in their schools (e.g., finding free internet, giving out food, riding the school bus with bagged lunches to connect with students and families).

Taken together, we believe our findings contribute to existing literature related to transforming school counseling and school counselors' leadership, especially during times of crisis (Shields et al., 2018; Stone & Dahir, 2015; Strear et al., 2019). As school counselors found themselves in the urgency of the pandemic, they were able to define a set of changes that offer promise for the future. Transformative change happened in a number of ways. First, counselors in the study acknowledged the salience and importance of their leadership roles in reaching students and families and providing responsive services for educational equity. Second, the school counselors observed changes in how stakeholders responded to them, and reported advocating for their roles as change agents. Last, all of the participants focused specifically on how newly gained insights helped them reconceptualize their school's response for the next crisis. In spite of a strong emphasis on school counselors' role in crisis response in the last few decades (Allen et al., 2002; ASCA, 2019a, 2019b), school counselors were compelled to reexamine the crisis response of their schools and were eager to participate in improving plans going forward. Taken together, these findings fit well with school counselors' positionality as equity-focused educational leaders, as articulated by Shields et al. (2018).

Limitations

Findings of the current study should be considered within the context of its limitations. Because most of the interviews were conducted during the first several months of the pandemic, school counselors might have different experiences since the school closure and reopening throughout the 2020–2021 school year. Due to the pandemic, we conducted the interviews virtually, which might have changed the scope of the interviews. For the current study, we recruited a total of 14 participants who were located in the South and Midwest of the United States. Although generalizability is not an aim of qualitative studies, transferability of the current findings may be limited by the situation of the participating school counselors. We acknowledge in the interpretation of our findings that school counselors located in other areas of the United States and internationally might have differing experiences because of differing circumstances (e.g., longer school closures, more loss in their communities).

Implications

Based on the limitations of the current study, future studies could explore school counselors' experiences after the pandemic to see how they adjusted over time to school closures. Future study designs could use stratified or purposive sampling of elementary, middle, and high school counselors to identify

developmental implications. Future studies might also recruit school counselors from areas that experienced severe impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including high rates of learning losses and negative personal and social impacts on students. Follow-up studies could explore whether school counselors continued transformed practices from the sudden shift to online programming, and whether they had renewed self-efficacy in providing services to students and families using technology, and helped address equity issues. Postpandemic, both quantitative and qualitative studies might examine outcomes related to changes in crisis response that build on the current study's findings.

The current study has specific implications for transforming school counseling practice, including advocacy, and counselor preparation. Practicing school counselors can use platforms (e.g., Canvas, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet) to increase accessibility and equity as part of their comprehensive school counseling program. Going forward, school counselors may weigh the advantages of new ways to use these technologies for program delivery (e.g., engaging students in online lessons) and for transforming their school community (e.g., improved crisis plans) based on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the current study, school counselors discovered the utility of technologies during the pandemic in reaching students and staying in touch with families. To keep in touch, families need access to technology and devices. During the pandemic, gaining access to internet services for families was key to the success of the migration to online school counseling programming. According to NCES (n.d.), most families have access to mobile phones, but access to other technologies varies. Therefore, when any counseling services are moved online in the future, school counselors need to advocate for schools to provide devices to assist families to better access counseling resources equitably.

Our findings indicate that some counseling programming likely may work just as well or even better online. As the pandemic situation has resolved and as schools have returned to normal schedules, we recommend that school counselors continue to evaluate which responsive services (e.g., psycho-educational programming and family outreach) work best using online platforms. For example, school counselors suggested using existing resources such as Canvas or Classroom Dojo announcements to communicate with parents during the pandemic. School counselors also found that caregivers were more likely to attend meetings held remotely via Zoom and vowed to keep doing meetings remotely for most parents. To improve family involvement among families who have work conflicts and transportation barriers, virtual parent–teacher meetings may be an underused resource in school counseling. Although school counselors are trained to provide strategies in crisis management and networking with stakeholders (Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2018), the pandemic disrupted everything they knew. Communication with other counselors helped them overcome challenges that included setting personal boundaries and the ethical delivery of counseling programs. By formalizing these

professional networks and lessons learned, school counselors may help school communities be better prepared for the next unexpected crisis.

Based on current findings and prior research (Cronin et al., 2018), elementary school counselors in particular could build online webpages to build stronger connections and frequent communication with students' families. During the pandemic, school counselors utilized online communication tools well to reach students' families. For secondary counseling, school counselors' recommendations included using Google docs, Canvas, and other platforms for checking in with students and giving them access to the counselor through virtual office hours, Google classrooms, or an online open-door policy. School counselors also can organize virtual parent nights to educate parents and share school resources to increase parent participation (Schwartz, 2017). Although family involvement practices similar to these have been documented elsewhere in the literature (Amatea et al., 2006; Bryan et al., 2019), the current research offers new perspectives on how school counselors may use technology platforms to increase families' participation. Based on high school counselors' suggestions, counselors can also use online tools to offer student success and graduation programming (e.g., informational sessions such as preparing for college applications or study skills).

Finally, counselor preparation programs should lead the way on evaluating the use of technology in comprehensive school counseling programs and include curricula to train and supervise school counselors accordingly (Mason et al., 2019). Although counseling students' comfort with technology use is high, school counselors may need training on specific informational and telehealth technologies (Johnson, 2019). Therefore, counselor education programs can develop or redesign current coursework to include specific online platforms, or offer professional development activities to improve the quality of school counselor practice using technology, with a focus on educational equity. Keeping up to date on the use of technology and remote counseling tools should be part of the school counselors' professional development activities and formal training. Now that the pandemic experience is largely behind us, we recommend that school counselor educators revisit the skill set needed for maximizing online comprehensive counseling programs. We also recommend university-school partnerships, in which school counseling programs partner with practicing school counselors and administrators to co-construct knowledge and skills related to effective use of technology in school counseling. University-school collaboration has potential to improve evidence-based practices in using technology in family outreach (Schwartz, 2017).

Conclusion

The 14 school counselors who participated in the current study provided valuable insight into the use of technology to manage the migration to online counseling services during the COVID-

19 pandemic and transform current practices. Findings of this transcendental phenomenological study inform school counseling practitioners and researchers' understanding the lived experiences of school counselors, and support application of those experiences to transformative change for the post-pandemic era.

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ORCID iDs

Taneshia Greenidge  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8789-2619>

Yi-Wen Su  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5954-1122>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Taneshia Greenidge, PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of Memphis in Memphis, TN.

Sondra Smith-Adcock, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Florida in Gainesville, FL.

Huzeyfe Cakmakci, PhD, is an assistant professor at Valdosta State University in Valdosta, GA.

Yi-Wen Su, PhD, is an assistant professor at Portland State University in Portland, OR.