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## **An Exploration of the School Counselors' Role in Providing Social-Emotional Support to Teen Mothers**

Madalyn Tinia Caldwell  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Madalyn T. Caldwell

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Review Committee

Dr. Ariel Harrison, Committee Chairperson, Counselor Education and Supervision  
Faculty

Dr. Julia Champe, Committee Member, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
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Abstract

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by

Madalyn T. Caldwell

EdS, Troy University-Montgomery, 2018

MS, Troy University-Montgomery, 2015

BA, Auburn University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

May 2024

## Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and bring understanding to the role of school counselors and their social-emotional work with adolescent mothers. Data were collected from six participants via video interviews and analyzed utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach. The selection criteria of the study included licensed or certified middle or high school counselors working within the United States with experience working with teen mothers in the school setting. Transcendental phenomenology was used to address the detailed description of the experiences of school counselors who work with adolescent mothers. Three themes developed from the study: importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles and responsibility. The implications of this study are relevant to positive social change through the knowledge of the impact that school counselors' have on providing social-emotional needs for teen mothers.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Leonard Caldwell, and my aunt, Tina Crawford, who always believed in my dreams. I miss you more than words can describe.

## Acknowledgments

I would not have been able to achieve this accomplishment without the amazing love and support of my mother, Cynthia Caldwell and grandmother, Lucile Brown. I thank you for never doubting me. Thank you to my son, Myles, for believing in me and being my biggest motivator. Thank you to my friends and family, who constantly encouraged me to continue to push through. I would also like to thank my doctoral committee for your guidance and support. To Dr. Harrison and Dr. Champe, thank you for your patience, consistent motivation, and insightful feedback. Finally, I would like to thank the participants, my fellow doctoral students, and everyone who has supported me through this journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teenage pregnancy refers to pregnant or parenting teens 17 years or younger or those who have not completed their primary education, such as high school (Sprague, 2021). Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) estimates that from 2018 to 2019 the teen pregnancy rate was about 16.7 per 1,000 females. Despite this number having declined from 17.4 per 1,000 females to 16.7 per 1,000 females over recent years, teen pregnancy remains a social issue that impacts families for generations (CDC, 2021; Watson & Vogel, 2017). The generational impact of pregnancy and parenting can be seen in how teen mothers often are impacted by community members' perceptions of their situations, relationship struggles, responsibilities, and increased stress (Dowden et. al., 2018). Due to the concurrent burdens of motherhood, adolescent life, and educational requirements only 50% of teen mothers graduate high school in comparison to 90% of non-parenting teenagers (Dowden et al., 2018; Watson & Vogel, 2017).

The acknowledgement of the mental health challenges of teenage mothers is becoming more prevalent and research has found that teenage mothers have a range of 15% to 50% in the diagnosis of postpartum depression in comparison to adult mothers with a 10% rate of postpartum depression diagnosis (Ladores & Corcoran, 2019). The increased risk of developing postpartum depression that adolescent mothers have also comes with increased effects of suicidal ideations, suicide attempts, and adverse child development (Dinwiddie et al., 2018). Despite the dangerous adverse outcomes of teenage pregnancy, literature on teenaged pregnancy often focuses on prevention,

highlighting programs such as The Innovative Pregnancy Prevention Programs Project (iTP<sub>3</sub>) and Plan Be \_\_, which are federally funded organizations working to prevent teen pregnancy across the United States (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2020; Garcia et al., 2022; Rotz et al., 2016). Much of the literature and programming for teenage mothers focuses on the prevention of pregnancy and not coping with pregnancy and parenting. This study explored the role of the school counselor and the importance of researching and understanding the thoughts, understandings, and experiences of school counselors and their role in providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers.

As teenaged mothers possess the responsibility to continue their education, receiving support from school counselors and other student support staff can be significant for their continued success. Researchers have found that increased counseling in high school leads to higher enrollment in some advanced classes, suggesting the importance of this partnership (Shi & Brown, 2020). Teen mothers who receive social support from positive adult relationships have lower rates of postpartum depression (Aytac & Yazici, 2020). Professional school counselors play a pivotal role in lessening the psychological burden and educational gap of teen mothers (Dowden et al., 2018). School counselor leadership is a necessity to foster educational equity (Strear et al., 2018). School counselors can manage the risk of the educational gap by meeting student needs through implementation of a school counseling core curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services to student's needs, and indirect student services (Merlin, 2017). Recent research has analyzed the impact of school counselors for those who are members of the LGBTQ community, students who may identify as racial and

cultural minorities, and students who experience socioeconomic disparities, however, very few studies concentrate on supporting and advocating for pregnant or parenting students (Quintana & Cole, 2021; Shell, 2021; Zyromski et al., 2020).

In this chapter, I will provide information regarding adolescent pregnancy and possible effects of adolescent pregnancy. This chapter will also include an explanation of the role of school counselors, current literature, and current efforts to address the educational and socioeconomic needs of teenage mothers.

### **Background of the Study**

Numerous studies have been conducted on teen pregnancy, but much of the research and discussion has focused on community teen pregnancy prevention programs or in-school teen pregnancy prevention programs. Yang et al. (2020) found that an increase of comprehensive sex education leads to increased knowledge of puberty and healthy living. While increased comprehensive sex education may increase teen knowledge of sex, there remain inconsistencies in evidence of how sex education can create a difference in pregnancy rates (Marseille et al., 2018). Teen mothers are 15% to 50% more likely to develop postpartum depression in comparison to 10% of adult mothers who develop postpartum depression (Ladores & Corcoran, 2019). The higher risk factors of developing postpartum depression for teenage mothers signifies the need for mental health services to address postpartum mental health. School counselors are influential in improving the accessibility and implementation of social-emotional programming for students that can lead to an increase in stress management, peer relationships, transitioning to adulthood, and academic achievement (Even & Quest,

2017). This information illustrates a gap in literature on the knowledge of the impact that social-emotional support from school counselors may have on pregnant and parenting teen mothers.

Perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMAD) are disorders that are amongst the most common conditions identified during pregnancy and the postpartum period (McKee et al., 2020). PMADs, such as postpartum depression, are often discussed amongst adult pregnancies, despite teenage mothers holding a higher risk for developing a PMAD. Researchers have identified numerous risk factors that increase the development of PMAD for teenage mothers. Some increased risk factors include lack of familial support, socioeconomic status, history of abuse, and prior diagnosis of depression (Dinwiddie et al., 2018; Hymas & Girard, 2019). The PMAD screening process for adolescent mothers is often less comprehensive in comparison to the screening process for adult mothers. Often adolescent mothers fail to understand and articulate the definition and symptoms of depression or other mental health disorders to healthcare professionals. (Bledsoe et al., 2017). The combination of higher risk factors and inadequate screening of PMAD likely raises chance for PMADs to develop.

In addition to the development of PMAD, teenage mothers also are subject to increased social stigma for violating social norms. A prominent ostracization of teenage motherhood was recorded by a Time cover story in 1985 featuring a pregnant teen titled “Children having Children” (Battle, 2020). A continuation of the experiences of stigmatization ranges from teenage mothers’ experiences less help in hospitals, low expectations, offensive comments, and sex education programs that emphasize the



adverse outcomes of teen births to promote abstinence (Battle, 2020). The exposure to social stigmas may lead to the increased traumatization of teenage mothers; thus, indicating an increased need for professional intervention in the lives of teenage mothers to assist with psychiatric health needs (Killian-Farrell et al., 2020).

The increased risk for development in PMAD for teenage mothers has led researchers to aim at understanding the impact that these adverse outcomes have. Watson and Vogel (2017) identified that teen mothers have increased challenges with educational attainment. The increased level of responsibility, stress, and pressure of motherhood often creates social battles of disappointment and isolation (Watson & Vogel, 2017). Continued research has identified limited or non-existent support systems that also contribute to the challenges of educational attainment challenges that teenage mothers have. The blend of motherhood and the stigma associated with motherhood creates a barrier in educational attainment (Dowden et al., 2018; Kiselica et al., 1998).

To decrease the burden that teenage mothers have in achieving their educational goals, Watson and Vogel (2017) found that school resources, such as school counselors, can have a vital role in changing the education experience of teenage mothers with the use of the Title IX legislation. The Title IX legislation mandates equal educational opportunities for all students, including pregnant and parenting teens (Watson & Vogel, 2017). School counselors are present within the school system to aid teenage mothers with their social-emotional needs. Gallo et al. (2020) recognized that the positive connection between high school students and school counselors can improve students' challenging circumstances. The constant adverse experiences with stigma can lead to

trauma experiences that can be alleviated by school counselors, due to their presence, educational training, and relational history with students to create a trauma-informed school environment and address the effects of trauma with individual students (Howell et al., 2019). School counselors have been identified as excellent resources for students who have experienced trauma exposure and are able to improve academic outcomes by providing emotional support to students (Howell et al., 2019).

### **American School Counseling Association**

School counseling began as vocational guidance in the early 1900s. Over time the role and direction of school counseling has become unclear and inconsistent between states, districts, and schools (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2019). The ASCA (2019) created The ASCA national model: *A Framework for School Counseling Programs* which helps move school counseling from a responsive service provided for some students to an active program for every student. The framework also reinforced the idea that school counselors help every student improve academic achievement, navigate social/emotional learning, and prepare for successful careers after graduation (ASCA, 2019). The objective of school counseling is to help students overcome barriers to learning and to prepare for successful lives after high school graduation (ASCA, 2019). The intention of the ASCA national model is to provide a foundation for school counselors and the school counseling profession to support the journey to help every student succeed. This framework establishes a clear guideline to create programs that address the complex and ever-changing barriers, such as teen pregnancy, that may prevent students' academic and social/emotional achievement.

To guide the school counselors' decision-making process, programming, and standardization of professional practice, ASCA implemented the ASCA ethical standards for school counselors (ASCA, 2016). The ASCA ethical standards (2016) specifies the ethical obligations that help define the roles and responsibilities of school counselors. These standards detail that school counselors have a responsibility to provide counseling to students in a brief context and support students and families/guardians in obtaining outside services if the student needs long-term clinical counseling. ASCA ethics also identifies an ethical obligation to exhibit concern with students' academic, career and social/emotional needs and encourage each student's maximum development. In addition, school counselors provide effective, responsive interventions to address student needs and consider full involvement of support networks and wraparound services to best serve students (ASCA, 2016). Ethical standards continue to specify that school counselors should provide opportunities for all students to develop the ASCA mindsets and behaviors necessary to learn work-related skills, resilience, perseverance, and a positive attitude toward learning (ASCA, 2016; 2019). This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aims to understand school counselors' expectations and understandings of their role in alignment with the ASCA National Model when working with adolescent mothers.

An initial review of literature highlights the prevention techniques that school counselors use to help prevent teen pregnancy. However, no studies were found to address the school counselor's role in working with adolescent mothers. Studies continue to highlight the need for comprehensive school counseling programs that properly align

with the ASCA National Model (2019) to create systemic change to foster academic achievement (Hines et al., 2020). This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aims to explore and bring understanding to the role of school counselors and their social-emotional work with adolescent mothers.

### **Problem Statement**

ASCA states the role of school counselors involves encouraging students to believe in their ability to develop, to encourage confidence in students' capability to succeed, to develop a sense of belonging at school, to influence and understand the concept of life-long learning, and to possess a positive attitude toward work and learning (ASCA, 2019). School counselors provide short-term counseling to students, individual student academic planning and goal setting, advocacy for students at student-focused meetings, and collaboration with families, administrators, and community members for student success (ASCA, 2019). As students, teenage mothers benefit from these services; however, despite teen pregnancy rates declining to 16.7% of births, these mothers are still tasked with nurturing a child, balancing new financial responsibilities, attending school, and navigating new social relationships (CDC, 2021). Student teenage mothers can also experience adverse pregnancy events such as miscarriage, stillbirths, and abortions (Kortsmit et al., 2022). While teenage mothers of miscarriages and abortions may not have the same responsibility of raising a small child, they must cope with the loss of a child and the mental strain that is associated with that loss, grief, perinatal trauma, and depressive symptoms in addition to completing their education. Years of public health reports have demonstrated the presence of teen

pregnancy (CDC, 2021 & Osterman, 2022), literature has also substantiated the need for social-emotional support to teen mothers (Jacob & Phillip, 2022 & Kiselica et al., 1998), but scholars have neglected to explore how school counselors provide social-emotional support to teen mothers. This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study will explore the lived experiences of school counselors' in providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study will be to gain understanding of school counselors' lived experiences providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. Current literature focuses on the school counselor's role in pregnancy prevention programs and numerous other teen experiences such as gender identification and trauma (Abreu et al., 2020; Hansen, 2020). There is little literature on the role of school counselors in addressing teen pregnancy. A transcendental phenomenological approach will be most suitable for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of school counselors. This approach will support my attempt at understanding the experiences and perceptions of school counselors and explore the ways in which school counselors work with teen mothers in support of their academic, personal/social, and career success. In exploring the stories behind the participants' lived experiences of their role and work with teen mothers, school counselors will have the opportunity to disclose their influence on the academic and postsecondary success of teen mothers.

### **Research Question**

RQ: What are school counselors' lived experience in providing social-emotional support for adolescent mothers?

Subquestion: How do school counselors' lived experiences working with adolescent mothers inform their roles, as defined by the ASCA National Model?

### **Theoretical Framework**

I will use Husserl's transcendental phenomenological framework to understand the experiences of school counselors. Husserl's transcendental phenomenological framework utilizes intentionality, noema, and noesis to create a subjective mind. Husserl describes intentionality as directionality of consciousness, with consciousness being described as a directional act rather than a thing (Hermberg, 2007). To further explore and understand the directionality of consciousness, Husserl identified noema and noesis. Noema is explained as the thought and noesis is explained as the thinking (Hermberg, 2007). Noema is the point of view through which the intentional object is accessed and noesis is the process of this point of view (Hermberg, 2007). Noema and noesis work together to create understanding of the directionality of consciousness. Noema describes a way that people organize aspects of the world. Noema refers to the exploration of the lived experiences of school counselors regarding their experiences providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. Noesis focuses on making sense of or creating the meaning of what is learned. Noesis will be sought through the process of uncovering themes found in participants' lived experiences (Moran, 2000).

Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences (Patton, 2015). The deep description of the everyday experiences of school counselors provided by transcendental phenomenology will create a comprehensive understanding of how these lived experiences inform the role of the school counselors' work with adolescent mothers. The theoretical framework will continue to be discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

This qualitative study utilizes a transcendental phenomenological research design and methodology. Phenomenology aims to provide a universal account of the way in which our understanding of the world is constituted, which will allow me to gather vivid and detailed perspectives of the lived experiences of school counselors providing social-emotional support to teenage mothers (Ainbinder, 2018).

My goal for using the transcendental phenomenological approach is to discover meaning and understanding of the sense of knowledge and practices of school counselors who provide social-emotional support to teenage mothers. Discussions about lived experiences make it possible for others to imagine those experiences and understand what the experiences are like (Peoples, 2021). Eberle (2014) described phenomenology as a philosophy. This phenomenological philosophy analyzes phenomena with the goal of describing the universal structures of subjective orientation in the lifeworld. The transcendental phenomenological approach aligns with the researcher's goal to explore and understand lived experiences of school counselors to create themes that provide synthesis of the meaning and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The

transcendental, phenomenological qualitative approach supports the purpose of the study to understand the experiences that influence the role of school counselors in working with adolescent mothers, specifically how their role aligns with the implementation of the ASCA National Model and ASCA Code of Ethics through the gathering of experiences and creating meaning from these experiences.

I will utilize a sample size of six to ten middle to high school counselors in the United States using theoretical sampling of nationwide counselors to better reflect diversity within the phenomena (Barbour, 2019). The true sample size will be determined based on data saturation and the ability for the sample size to reflect diversity (Barbour, 2019). The methodology will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Definitions**

The following terms are defined to help the reader understand the context of key terms in this study.

*Adolescent mother:* Parenting mother less than 19 years of age (Gregory et al., 2021).

*Adolescent pregnancy:* Pregnant or parenting teens 17 years or under or those who have not completed their primary education, such as high school (Sprague, 2021).

*ASCA National Model:* Guides school counselors in the development of school counseling programs that are based on data-informed decision making, delivered to all students systematically, developmentally appropriate for mindsets and behaviors of all students. The ASCA National Model also intends to close achievement and opportunity gaps and improve student achievement, attendance, and discipline (ASCA, 2019)



*Intentionality*: Consciousness to the internal experience of being conscious of something (Husserl, 1931)

*Noema*: A meaning that is given to an intentional act (Moustakas, 1994)

*Noesis*: Gives meaning to an intentional act (Moustakas, 1994)

*School counselors*: Holding a master's degree or higher in the field of counseling, professionally certified individuals who focus on student planning, short term intervention or response service, and program accountability to remove barriers to learning for all students (Lambie et al., 2019).

*Social-Emotional learning*: Refers to the process of learning and practicing essential cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies (Hatchimonji et al., 2022)

### **Assumptions**

The first assumption is that participants will provide honest answers to interview questions. Participants providing complete and truthful answers can impact the credibility of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants may be reluctant to answer truthfully because they will be asked to provide responses related to their work and experiences, impacting the information gathered for the study. To be eligible for participation, respondents must be licensed school counselors practicing in the middle or high school setting for at least three years. Due to this eligibility requirement, another assumption is that participants will have knowledge of and abide by the ASCA Code of Ethics (2016) and ASCA National Model (2019). Lastly, I assumed that I understand the school counselors' role in supporting students in varying circumstances, such as teenage mothers.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study, I will focus on school counselors in the United States. The research was delimited by school type, with only middle and high school counselors eligible for participation. The study will involve practicing school counselors who have worked with middle to high school students and have experience working with teen mothers. The scope of this study may limit transferability – the applicability of the study’s findings to other situations- due to the various geographical and socioeconomical differences amongst school counselors. While the scope of this study may limit transferability, researchers have specifically called for further exploration of intervention options for increasing education attainment for pregnant and parenting teen mothers (Dowden et al., 2018).

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this transcendental phenomenological study includes regional limitations, transferability, and bias. To ensure that the pure views are presented, the researcher will engage in bracketing. Bracketing will be accomplished through memos. Memos take the form of theoretical notes which elucidate the cognitive process of research (Tufford & Newman, 2012). This process will allow the researcher to explain preconceptions and become more immersed in the research process.

Transferability is a possibility when using a qualitative research approach. Transferability is the direct function of similarities between two contexts (Patton, 2015). Transferability is the way in which qualitative studies can be applicable to broader contexts while still maintaining their richness (Carl & Ravitch, 2020). Information

gathered from the lived experiences of participants may be similar to insights of other populations or settings (Peoples, 2020). Transferability may be affected by the research setting, research participants, and experiences addressed in the research.

A possible limitation of transferability lies within the regional restraints of the study, with the focus only being for school counselors in various regions of the United States. There are differences throughout regions including accessibility, resources, and various policies and procedures. These differences may limit the understanding that school counselors in other regions have due to the varying role of school counselors, accessibility to school counseling, and cultural perceptions of teenage mothers.

Bias is a possible limitation that may affect the study. Researcher bias develops because of the social world and therefore may contribute to the research study (Given, 2008). The inability to separate my vision and opinions from the research may cause limitations within the study (Galdas, 2017). To ensure that the researcher's perceptions do not lead to researcher bias journaling and member checking will be used to decrease the likelihood of these occurrences. Journaling and member checking will aid in setting aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Significance of Study**

The results of this study may provide important data on how school counselors experience their role as school counselors when providing social-emotional support with teen mothers. The findings from this study may inform curriculum in school counselor training and preparation programs to better address specific needs of adolescent mothers. Researching the experiences of school counselors who work with adolescent mothers

may bring awareness and understanding to the impact on social-emotional maturity that school counselors have on adolescent mothers. Therefore, potential contributions of this are to: (a) explore the experiences of middle and high school counselors who provide social-emotional support for adolescent mothers, (b) identify perceptions of how school counselors identify their role in working with adolescent mothers, (c) increase understanding of the resources that school counselors may provide to adolescent mothers. Positive social change implications may include improved support for the social-emotional development of teenage mothers in the schools to support educational attainment and mental health development through an increase of the awareness of mental health needs, increase in the utilization of mental health resources, and improved educational outcomes.

### **Summary**

School counselors aim to help every student improve academic achievement, navigate social/emotional learning, and prepare for successful careers after graduation (ASCA, 2019). Teen mothers deserve help, respect, a chance and basic rights (Watson & Vogel, 2017). Teen mothers often face difficulties finding support to improve their academic, mental, and emotional health. Dowden et al. (2018) found that school counselors can positively impact the education attainment for pregnant and parenting teens. Given the continued prevalence and effects of teen pregnancy on the future of teen mothers, it is vital to understand the critical role of school counselors in providing therapeutic support to teen mothers. Further exploration of the experiences and roles of school counselors working with adolescent teens may be useful in increasing the

effectiveness of school counseling interventions for educational attainment among pregnant and parenting teens.

Chapter 1 included an overview of the research study. The overview includes a brief explanation of the purpose and nature of the study, establishes background information on the importance of the study, and the theoretical framework. I also provided definitions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study to provide a clear synopsis of the research study.

Chapter 2 will include an in-depth review of literature. This literature review will further present the search strategy and literature related to school counselors and teen motherhood. Lastly, a more thorough explanation of the theoretical foundation of the study will be reviewed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the United States, teen pregnancy is a social issue that has impacted families for generations (Watson & Vogel, 2017). Although the CDC has reported a constant decline in teen births since 1991, the United States is at a record low rate of less than 18 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 years of age, it has been proven to harm teenage mothers' educational attainment, psychological development, and economic stability (Livingston & Thomas, 2019; Warner-McIntyre, 2018). The increased risk of harm to the psychological development and economic stability of teen mothers has led to experiences of deviation from behavioral norms and expectations (Piscitello et al., 2022). The result of these deviations includes the 50% dropout rate of teen parents, increased suicidal ideations, and an increased likelihood of developing postpartum depression in comparison to adult mothers (Akella & Jordan, 2015; Dinwiddie et al., 2018; Watson & Vogel, 2017). By recognizing the adversities of teen mothers and using the intentional and consistent role of school counselors, Dowden (2018) found positive impact on the educational attainment of teen mothers.

Ethical standards have established the importance of school counseling in overall student success and reinforced the role of school counselors in improving academic achievement, social/emotional learning, and successful careers for students (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2019). This phenomenological qualitative study will aim to understand school counselors' expectations and understandings of their role in alignment with the ASCA National Model when working with adolescent mothers.

### Literature Search Strategy

I began by searching for peer-reviewed articles published within five years via the following databases: Thoreau multi-database, EBSCO, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES. The keywords searched included *adolescent mothers, teen moms, postnatal or postpartum mental health, school counselors, school-based mental health, culturally responsive, education barriers, social justice and advocacy, role of school counselors, impact of teen pregnancy, ASCA National Model, and school-based pregnancy interventions*. Due to limited results on recent mental health barriers for teenage mothers and the school counselor's impact on social-emotional support, I expanded the search limitations from five years to peer-reviewed articles published more than five years ago. The key concepts and definitions of this study were determined by research findings and scholarly definitions utilized in studies included in this literature review.

During the literature review, I was able to locate numerous articles addressing the role that school counselors hold in social justice and advocacy. An example of this literature includes studies by Shell (2021) and Zyromski (2021), which found that school counselors can improve academic achievement and create more proactive programming by using evidence-based, multicultural responses. Kiselica (1998 & 2008) explored and compared the impact of teen parenting on men and women. This research identified numerous similarities, such as educational attainment and parenting needs, as hardships that teen mothers and fathers experienced. Ultimately, Kiselica (1998 & 2008) confirmed the need for teen mothers and fathers to have positive formal services, like counseling,

parenting classes, teen parenting support groups, and specialized educational options, to learn how to cope with the drastic changes associated with becoming a parent.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Phenomenology is defined as a research approach that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomena by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). I will utilize the phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences of school counselors' and their work with teenage mothers (Patton, 2015). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study will aim to understand school counselors' expectations and understandings of their role in alignment with the ASCA National Model when providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers.

There are two main theoretical frameworks associated with phenomenology, hermeneutic and transcendental. Martin Heidegger branched off Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and constructed the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Hermeneutic tradition is situated within the phenomenological movement but differs in its ability to search for understanding of naturally occurring phenomena and includes various perspectival views (Dibley et al., 2020). Heidegger stated that there is no way for people to separate themselves from the world and proposed the hermeneutic circle, which describes a way of utilizing foresight to bring understanding and interpretation to something (Dibley et al., 2020; Peoples, 2021). The use of hermeneutic phenomenology would not be appropriate for this study because I do not have foresight or fore-conception of the field of school counseling. Transcendental phenomenology was identified by



Edmund Husserl and emerged from a failure to connect human consciousness and the material world (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl identified transcendental phenomenology as an intrinsic structure of our consciousness and identified intentionality as the act of consciousness (Yee, 2019). Moustakas (1994) described intentionality as the consciousness of one's internal experience. Intentionality is comprised of noema and noesis. Noema is the appearance of a phenomenon, while noesis is the meaning and perception of a phenomenon. The use of intentionality, noema, and noesis is critical in ensuring the success of the transcendental framework. Further, the success of this transcendental phenomenological framework relies on the researcher's ability to reduce the noematic and noetic phenomena to fully discern the participants' beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2021).

Transcendental phenomenology allows access to a purified phenomena that is void of speculations (Hermberg, 2007). Husserl believed that human thoughts are linked to an objective existence (Peoples, 2021). Transcendental phenomenology was chosen for its ability to remove the researcher's bias and focus on the essence of the phenomena as detailed by the participants. In comparison, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses more on understanding the context of the phenomena of participants (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

In this study, transcendental phenomenology will allow for a detailed description of the experiences of school counselors who work with adolescent mothers as the experiences relate to social-emotional support. This framework will provide the ability to explore the participants' experiences accurately, understand their perceptions, and

highlight ways that school counselors can continue to be supported in their effort to improve the academic attainment of all students. Additionally, the phenomenological approach has been previously used by researchers to gather information on teen pregnancy and educational attainment and have called for further research of the school counseling role in assisting teens in educational achievement (Dowden et al., 2018; Bouknight-Bates, 2021; Kerobo, 2022).

## **Literature Review**

### **Teen Pregnancy Statistics**

Teen pregnancy is defined as pregnancies conceived in individuals who are 17 or under or those who have not completed their primary education (Eliner et al., 2021; Sprague, 2021). In 2020 National Vital Statistics reported 158,043 teen births (Osterman et al., 2022). National Vital Statistics Reports has consistently reported that teen pregnancy has decreased nationally every year, with a decrease of 71% of teen births since 2007 but continues to note that the United States has the highest teen birth rate among developed nations (Martin et al., 2017). Cultural disparities exist regarding race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status resulting in a higher occurrence of teen pregnancy risks and lower levels of decline or unchanged numbers of reported births (Martin et al., 2021; Mollborn, 2017).

There are numerous complexities brought on by teen pregnancy, including varying levels of support from the family, community, and government, isolation, fear of motherhood, social judgment, finances, and educational and occupational disruptions (Kerobo, 2022). One of the most prevalent changes that teen parents face is the ability to

maintain their educational pursuits. Watson and Vogel (2017) identified a concern that only 50% of teen mothers are likely to graduate high school, and less than 2% are able to obtain a college degree by the age of 30. Despite the availability of some employment options that do not require diplomas or degrees, the difficulty to attain a high school diploma or higher for many teen mothers equates to adverse labor outcomes and increased poverty (Berthelon & Kruger, 2015; Mollborn, 2018).

### **Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders in Teen Mothers**

Another complexity that is added to the lives of teen mothers includes mental health. McKee et al. (2020) explored the prevalence of perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMAD) and serious mental illness (SMI) among delivering mothers and defined PMAD as being among the most common conditions identified during pregnancy and postpartum. These disorders include postpartum depression, postpartum anxiety, postpartum psychosis, and postpartum OCD. Postpartum depression identifies common risk factors such as constant low mood, feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, sleep and appetite disturbances, and an inability to take care of the newborn (Ghafoor et al., 2020; van der Zee-van den Berg et al., 2021). Risk factors that influence the influx of postpartum depression diagnoses may be associated with being a part of low socio-economic groups, financial hardships, difficulty finding childcare, inadequate perinatal mental health screenings, and less social and emotional support that negatively impacts the mother's ability to improve their parenting skills and reduces the mother's chances of returning to school after giving birth (Assini-Meyten et al., 2018). Laurenzi et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of 17 studies resulting in the finding that thus far, research has

focused on the effects of PMAD in adult mothers with less attention on teen mothers, who have shown to have a higher probability of developing perinatal mood disorders due to experiencing more psychosocial challenges than adult mothers. With teen mothers experiencing 25% of PMAD diagnoses compared to 10% of adult PMAD diagnoses, there is a critical evidence gap and urgent need for improvement and prevention of mental health interventions among pregnant and parenting teen mothers (Dinwiddie, 2018; Laurenzi et al., (2020).

Further research has found that the social and psychological complexities of teen motherhood may continue to cause strain on the mother's ability to continue their education due to more frequent absenteeism and difficulty balancing schoolwork and parenting (Dowden et al., 2018). Aytac and Yazici (2020) identified that an increase in the perception of social support leads to a decrease in postpartum depression in mothers. For teen mothers, an increase in positive social support can be found with school counselors who can combine social justice and therapeutic support to address the problematic realities of what marginalized student groups are experiencing in schools (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018; Laurenzi et al., 2020). When teen mothers return to school, they face an additional battle of being subject to discrimination from teachers and peers due to social stigma, psychological stress, and negative impacts on social relationships, such as losing friends and missing school social events (Kerobo, 2022). With the knowledge and skills of counseling, education, and community resources, school counselors can help ease the transition to school and the effects of PMAD.

## **Social-Emotional Development**

The brain development that supports learning is dependent on social experiences. These social experiences also impact the quality of a person's relationships with other people and health (Immodino-Yang et al., 2018). Social-emotional development is the process of learning and practicing essential cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies (Hatchimonji et al., 2022). Elias et al. (1997) further described social-emotional development as the development of the ability to manage emotions, set and achieve goals, appreciate care and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and deal constructively with interpersonal situations.

Research emphasizes the development of numerous essential social-emotional learning competencies as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, resiliency, diligence, and future-mindedness (Hatchimonji et al., 2022; Immodino-Yang et al., 2018). These social-emotional competencies are positively linked to improving the positive purpose of students indicating a long-term life goal that aims to contribute to the world beyond self (Hatchimonji et al., 2022). Additionally, 80% of adolescent students from diverse backgrounds are found to lack many of the identified core social-emotional skills decreasing their ability to create and identify safe and enriching environments (Jacob & Philip, 2022). Teenage mothers are often amongst a population experiencing social, political, and economic disparities that are more likely to lack these core social-emotional skills (Fuller et al., 2018).

Immordino-Yang et al. (2018) identified stress, during the adolescent phase, as a potential cause for early sexual maturity and worse psychosocial outcomes leading to risky decision making that negative effects educational results. Although stress may have negative sexual and educational outcomes for adolescents, this is also a phase of life where the brain is more sensitive to social reputation and the maturing of higher-order thinking allowing for the capacity of new emotional regulation skills, identity development, and long-term planning (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018). Social-emotional learning programs that are developed by school counselors are able to increase students' growth, success, and educational outcomes through the support of student development and creating positive school climate (Stevens, 2021).

### **Education and Teenage Pregnancy**

Teenage pregnancy is not a new phenomenon, and neither are the effects of teenage pregnancy. The educational impact that teenage pregnancy has held spans decades. Lang and Weinstein (2015) explored the effects of teenage motherhood in the 1940s – 1960s and identified the progression of the social and educational response to teenage pregnancy. While this study does not find many of the economic hardships that teenage parents have today, they do find significant data suggesting that marriages due to teen pregnancy were higher reducing the financial hardships often associated with single parenthood (Lang & Weinstein, 2015). Indications were found that recognize an increase in high school dropouts and expulsions of teen mother prior to the enactment of the Title IX of the Educational Amendments to the Civil Rights Act (Title IX) (Lang & Weinstein, 2015). Prior to the enactment of Title IX school districts held the discretion of the

treatment of teenage mothers, which often lead to expulsions, refusal to readmit students after birth, and the removal from regular classrooms (Guldi, 2016).

The Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments to the Civil Rights Act (Title IX Act) prohibited all institutions who receive federal funding from excluding pregnant and parenting teenagers from classes, thus expanding the educational opportunities for teenage parents (Guldi, 2016). Since 1972, schools have had to change their approach to inclusive learning for parenting teens. An early look into the educational response to the Title IX Act of 1972 is captured by Zellman (1981). A field study by Zellman (1981) highlighted the perspectives and responses of 12 teen pregnancy programs throughout 11 school districts in the country. The programs reviewed were either inclusive curriculum programs, supplementary curriculum programs, and or noncurricular programs (Zellman, 1981). The early response to the Title IX Act of 1972 resulted in school programs being heavily influenced by the personal views of the school personnel. The study found that school staff often did not find relevance in creating comparable programs for teen mothers resulting in the efficacy of these programs relying heavily on the dedication of concerned persons in the district (Zellman, 1981). Lastly, Zellman emphasized the precise role that school officials play in the education of teen parents due to the extenuating circumstances that often make attending school impossible. These studies indicate the progress and need for school assistance with teen motherhood. With the enactment of the Title IX Act of 1972 and the increased knowledge of the mental, educational, and social impact that teen motherhood has on the mother, the necessity of the role of the school counselor is becoming more present.

It has been 50 years since the passing of the Title IX Act of 1972 and over 40 years since the field study conducted by Zellman (1981). The research has identified schools' difficulty to remove personal beliefs from teen parenting program implementation, difficulty to understand the needs of teen parents, and difficulty to properly implement effective programs to support teen parents (Zellman, 1981). The current response to teen parenting has shifted to teen pregnancy prevention, implementation of alternative teaching methods for teen parents, and in school childcare services (Brouwer et al., 2018; Einhorn, 2015; Garney et al., 2020).

Teenage pregnancy prevention programs have consistently been developed since the publication of the Zellman (1981) field study. Teenage pregnancy prevention programs are often implemented through school districts, utilizing school counseling programs, and collaborating with community public health programs (Garney et al., 2019). Garney et al. (2019) conducted a literature review to identify gaps in the research of teen pregnancy prevention programs with the goal of providing insight into the level of intervention of teen pregnancy prevention programs. Out of the 37 teenage pregnancy prevention programs included in the study, all focused on individual-level changes and were implemented in schools (middle or high school), after-school programs, or community-based organizations (Garney et al., 2019). While the constant decline in the rate of teen pregnancy in the United States demonstrates the effectiveness that teen pregnancy prevention programs may offer, the review of evidenced-based interventions for addressing teen pregnancy found that there are gaps in the intervention methods and their application to social reality. Most teen pregnancy prevention programs aim at the



individual, creating a gap in the intervention of teen pregnancy prevention at the organization, community, and policy levels resulting in change only at the individual level and not at social groups such as, vulnerable adolescents, racial minorities, and sexual minorities (Garney, et al., 2019).

### **Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs**

Teen pregnancy prevention programs are not guaranteed to eliminate teen pregnancy. Teen pregnancy has been linked to poverty, family dysfunction, and reduced educational attainment (Brouwer et al., 2019). Hope Academy is a school in which pregnant and parenting teens can attend to complete high school and raise their children (National Literacy Directory, 2015). The Hope Academy serves pregnant and parenting teens ages 14-21 who are completing high school or a GED within 60 miles of La Crosse, Wisconsin at no cost to their families (National Literacy Directory, 2015). Brouwer et al. (2019) evaluated the program outcomes and experiences of the teenage mother who have graduated from Hope Academy. In addition to educational attainment, the school also promotes parenting skills and early childhood development needs of teen mothers and their children through mentorship and peer support (Brouwer et al., 2019). The study interviewed eight graduates of Hope Academy to better understand the outcomes of a freestanding alternative high school program for pregnant and parenting teenagers. All the participants successfully completed high school. The study concluded that alternative school programs are effective in promoting parent and child well-being through physical, emotional and mental health of the mother. Most importantly, the study identified that teen mothers greatly benefit from the ability to attain an education in an environment that

teaches them how to live within their communities and reduce maladaptive familial and societal outcomes (Brouwer et al., 2019).

### **Alternative School-Based Support**

School-based childcare services are also innovative ways that school systems have begun assisting in educational attainment for teen mothers. Jenkins (2014) conducted a report exploring recommendations for Project U-Turn to help reengage parenting teens in education programs. Project U-Turn is a collaborative approach in dropout prevention and reengagement lead by Philadelphia Youth Network, by offering multiple pathways to graduation through accelerated high schools, GED to college programs, and educational option programs (Jenkins, 2014). Researchers explored these pathways to graduation by conducting several interviews with social service agencies, program staff, and program participants to further understand the program organization and systemic barriers and inconsistencies (Jenkins, 2014). This study identified that students who are reliant on childcare centers are often likely to miss school due to childcare arrangements not being open at times when it is needed. The study further identified a larger barrier for teenage parents who have to rely on relatives for childcare resulting in more frequent absences from school (Jenkins, 2014). When school systems begin to address the childcare difficulties of teen parents, like at Pathways in Detroit, students report relief from the pressure of the rigor of traditional school and managing time and childcare (Einhorn, 2015). Jenkins (2014) added to literature the impact that in-school childcare can have on the attendance and parenting skills for adolescent parents.

While some school districts have adopted alternative methods for addressing teen pregnancy, most school districts continue to focus on pregnancy prevention and disregard the numerous teenagers who are already parenting. Using a comprehensive search strategy for literature published between January 1985 and May 2017, Marseille et al. (2018) identified no existing studies addressing the effect of school-based programs to reduce pregnancy in the USA. After undertaking the systematic review and meta-analysis of the research, Marseille et al. (2018) concluded that there was no consistent evidence of increased condom usage, delayed sexual initiation, or reduction in teen pregnancy. This study emphasizes the continued need for effective prevention programs, but also the need to address teen pregnancy in education. The school counselors' ability to assist students in recognizing and eliminating educational barriers can help maximize the mentality, behaviors, and educational benefits for adolescent parents and their children in a way that traditional pregnancy prevention programs cannot (McGaha-Garnett et al., 2013; Perry, 2017).

### **School Counselor Role**

The field of school counseling is over 100 years old and began as vocational guidance in the early 1900s (Gysbers, 2010). In the 1920s the evolution from vocational guidance to school counseling began with focus shifting from vocational counseling to psychological issues and personal adjustment (Gysbers, 2010). The 1930s through the 1950s saw a transition in the school counselor's role in the extension of counseling services due to changes in federal legislation, such as the Title IX Act, and the incorporation of the American School Counselor Association. This change brought

attention to the need for school counseling and the improvement of services provided and ASCA established the growth, practices, and procedures to further develop school counselors' roles and responsibilities (Gysbers, 2010). As the impact and functions of the school counselor continued to develop ASCA officially changed the terminology from guidance counselors to school counselors in 1990 (Zymroski et al., 2019). Since this change, ASCA has placed much emphasis on identifying the role of school counselors, creating and revising school counseling protocol, and ensuring nationwide consistency with the programming and implementation of school counseling services (ASCA, 2019; Gysbers, 2010; Wong, 2019). The ASCA National Model incorporates theory and standardization to the field to bring effectiveness and cohesion to the school counseling profession and help students, including teen mothers, overcome barriers to learning and prepare for success post-graduation (ASCA, 2019; Gysbers, 2010). The ASCA National Model reinforces that school counselors help every student improve academic achievement, navigate social-emotional learning, and prepare for successful careers after graduation (ASCA, 2019).

Due to the periodic shifts in the profession of school counseling, there have been historical difficulties in establishing the identity and role of school counselors. The American School Counseling Association (2019) defined school counselors' role as to help students apply achievement strategies, manage emotions, apply interpersonal skills, and plan for postsecondary options. School counselors provide small and large group counseling, short-term counseling, individual student planning and advisement, crisis counseling, collaborative partnerships, and consultation (ASCA, 2012). To achieve these

roles, school counselors often must take on leadership and advocacy roles to assist students. Shell (2021) identified a culturally responsive school leadership framework that encourages social justice and education equity. This requires school counselors to develop self-awareness, identify biases, values, and beliefs to avoid adversely impacting students. In addition to the development of school counselors' leadership and advocacy roles, school counselors must also advocate for the importance of their roles to other school professionals, such as the school principal and teachers. Lewis et al. (2022) interviewed 32 school principals to understand their agreeance with the essential roles identified by school counselors within the same school district. The study found that principals and school counselors of this district identify counseling, socio-emotional support, and student advocacy as essential tasks associated with the role of the school counselor, with test administration, office tasks, classroom coverage, and record maintenance being low importance and inappropriate tasks. This study differs from Lowery et al. (2018), who identified that school principals found it appropriate to utilize school counselors as test managers, data-entry clerks, and disciplinarians. The difference can be due to changes between state-to-state guidelines and relationships between the school counselor and school principal. It is the responsibility of the school counselor to advocate for their appropriate role in the school to reduce role ambiguity and to define the value and responsibilities of school counselors within the school system (Havlik et al., 2019).

## **ASCA National Model**

The ASCA National Model provides professional standards for school counselors to follow. These professional standards ensure new and experienced school counselors are equipped to establish, maintain, and enhance a comprehensive school counseling program addressing academic achievement, career planning, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2019). Professional standards identified by ASCA include the self-assessment of the school counselors' mindsets and behaviors and creating a professional development plan to address these mindsets (ASCA, 2019). The ASCA professional standards and competencies are divided into mindset and behaviors. The mindset standards are used to inform school counselors on the beliefs that they should hold about student achievement and success. The behaviors standards have specific, measurable competencies to ensure that school counselors demonstrate professional foundation, direct and indirect services, and planning and assessment of comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019).

In addition to defining professional standards and competencies of the professional school counselors, the ASCA National Model also defines the ethics of school counselors. The ASCA Ethical Standard for School Counselors specifies the principles of ethical behavior necessary to maintain the highest standard of integrity, leadership, and professionalism. Ethical standards are in place to ensure educational equity is maintained for all students. According to the ASCA Ethical Standards, school counselors should aim to provide counseling to students in a brief context and support students and families in obtaining outside services if the student needs long-term clinical

counseling (American School Counseling Association, 2022, A.1.e.). In addition, school counseling ethics encourages support for all students and their development by actively working to eliminate systematic barriers or bias that may impede student development (ASCA, 2022, A.1.c). Underrepresented students, such as teen mothers, are likely to benefit most from the ethical standard of school counselors to advocate for equal rights and access to a free, appropriate public education free of stigmatization or isolation based on exceptionalities (ASCA, 2022, A.10.a). Exploring the alignment of school counselors' counseling programs and their experiences working with teen mothers can be significant in understanding how school counselors support their mothering students.

Teen mothers frequently experience societal shame, judgement, and stigma from society resulting in the development of aggression, depression, and violent behaviors (Van Velsor, 2009). The role of school counselors to improve social-emotional development for teen mothers can significantly impact the teen mothers' ability to attain academic achievement and career development (Van Velsor, 2009; Warner-McIntyre, 2018). Numerous studies have shown that teen mothers are more likely to drop out of high school or not continue with postsecondary education (Mollborn, 2017; Maslowsky, et al. 2022). School counselors can reduce the achievement gap for underrepresented students, identifying that 92,000 students identify that their school counselor is the most influential person to discuss their postsecondary education (Cholewa et al., 2018; Grey; 2019). Teen mothers are more likely to report positive social-emotional outcomes when they are offered education that includes childcare, sexuality education, parenting classes, teen mom camaraderie, and most importantly regular access to a nonjudgemental

encouraging counselor (Warner-McIntyre, 2018). When school counselors properly advocate their role to provide counseling services, student planning and advising, and socio-emotional support to students' significant impacts may occur, including supporting the needs of teen mothers.

Research has shown how the role of school counselors can greatly impact the ability for teenage mothers to improve their social-emotional resiliency. Kiselica and Pfaller (1993) identified the imperativeness of the school counselor's awareness of problems and opportunities for growth associated with the developmental crisis of teenage pregnancy. School counselors have the challenge to translate their training and education to actionable steps to develop outreach strategies, establishing rapport, addressing student concerns, and utilizing appropriate referrals (Kiselica and Pfaller, 1993). Johnson (2006) provided a continuation of the research of Kiselica and Pfaller (1993) by proving the benefits of having in-school support for teenage mothers. Johnson (2006) urged that just as programming for teen parents is available in the community, these same programs and supports should be provided in the schools through school counselors becoming well-versed in effective advocacy for teenage mothers and community collaboration.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This literature review has revealed the issues related to adolescent mothers and their educational attainment and the role of school counselors. School counselors must adhere to ethical standards as they develop comprehensive school counseling programs that align with the ASCA National Model to address adolescent mothers' difficulties



while pursuing their education adequately. There remains a lack of literature on identifying the effects of psychosocial interventions on the educational attainment of teen mothers. Still, research does support positive results associated with teen mothers who have access to resources to develop social-emotional learning, such as social support networks such as partners, friends, therapists, doctors, and social service agencies (Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2015; van Vugt & Versteegh, 2020). Research has supported that the positive effects of advocacy, social support, and therapeutic services of school counselors are imperative in bridging the gap between improving mental health needs for teen mothers and educational attainment (Dinwiddie et al., 2018; Pringle et al., 2019).

Chapter 3 will include an in-depth discussion of the research methodology of this study. The research design and rationale, the researcher's role, and the study's methods will be discussed. The methodology will include logic and the participant selection process. The instrumentation and procedures of the recruitment, participation and data collection are included in the methodology section. Lastly, the information on data analysis and issues of trustworthiness will also be discussed.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aimed to understand school counselors' expectations and understandings of their role in alignment with the ASCA National Model when working with adolescent mothers. In this chapter, I will provide the specific research plan for the study; this will include a description of the research design and rationale. This chapter will also include a discussion of the researcher's role, methodology, and data analysis plan.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this transcendental phenomenological study, I sought to address the following research questions: What are school counselors' lived experience in providing social-emotional support for adolescent mothers? and How do school counselors' lived experiences working with adolescent mothers inform their roles, as defined by the ASCA National Model? The principal phenomena studied explored how school counselors provide social-emotional support to teen mothers.

To address the research questions, I used a transcendental phenomenological qualitative research method. Qualitative research design is a dynamic, systematic, and engaged process of planning rigorous inquiries and interprets the meaning-making process (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, I used a transcendental phenomenological design, which aimed at understanding lived experiences (Peoples, 2020). Qualitative research uses interpretive research methods as tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make

meaning of and interpret their own experiences, themselves, each other, and the social world (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Two phenomenological approaches were considered for and examined for this study: hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the stories of individuals to understand their daily experiences with emphasis on the researcher's education and knowledge base that led to the investigation of the phenomenon; while transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to eliminate and neutralize any bias or preconceptions about the phenomenon at hand (Neubauer et al., 2019). Transcendental phenomenology is viewed as a revolutionary examination of our relation to the world, more so a conceptual representation infused with sensory input (Smith, 2013). The transcendental phenomenology approach also allows for a richer, detailed experience of the school counselors' experience in understanding their role in providing for teenage mothers. While I have degrees in general counseling and community counseling, a certification in perinatal mental health, and an understanding of counseling skills and techniques, I do not have experience in school counseling. My role as an insider and outside in this area of counseling will help to inform my use of transcendental phenomenology by obtaining unbiased knowledge of the data (Hermberg, 2007).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in this transcendental phenomenological study is the observer. As the observer I maintained credibility, reliability, and dependability of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Rose & Johnson, 2020). When using the transcendental

qualitative approach, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and identifies personal values, biases, and assumptions outside of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used different protocols, such as bracketing and reflective journaling, to recognize personal assumptions and to reduce researcher bias during this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Peoples, 2020). I am formally educated and trained to counsel as a licensed professional counselor and do not practice as a school counselor. As a certified perinatal mental health counselor, I have counseled teen parents throughout pregnancy and noticed a lack of social-emotional support when integrating into the educational system as a teen mother.

Although the knowledge and experience I have gained through my counseling practice may offer a vantage point for understanding and relating to experiences the participants may identify in the study I have no affiliation with the field of school counseling and no relationship with the research participants. Due to the various locations of participants and the requirement that all participants are school counselors, the likelihood of the researcher having a previous connection to the participants and their work setting is improbable. I used bracketing and reflective journaling of personal thoughts and feelings while conducting this study. Bracketing is an attempt for the researcher to suspend beliefs, values, predispositions, and prior assumptions related to the study to give full attention to the interviewee and their ideas and beliefs (Patton, 2015; Peoples, 2020; Yin, 2016). Reflective journaling is the process of making notes observations, concerns, or personal experiences throughout the data collection process.

These notes are used to reflect on how the researcher's personal opinions and experiences may shape the interpretation of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher's role is also to determine the ideal participant for the study. The study required participants to be practicing school counselors who have worked with middle to high school students and who can articulate their experience in providing social-emotional support to teenage mothers in the school setting. As the researcher, I viewed myself as the instrument that gathers data from participants utilizing interviews, video/audio recordings, and field notes. The researcher analyzed the gathered data.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Qualitative researchers focus on depth rather than breadth; therefore, this study sought a sample of six to 10 participants in an effort to understand their lived experiences and understandings of their role in providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. The sample size is justified by the purpose of qualitative sampling which is to create a sample size that yields information rich data and maximizes information (Yin, 2016). Purposive sampling is defined as the selection of participants to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance to the study's research question (Yin, 2016). Purposive random samples add credibility to a qualitative study and can reduce selection bias and provide an opportunity for generalizability (Patton, 2015). The recruitment of participants occurred within the United States and included school counselors currently practicing at middle and high schools in the United States. Due to the ideal sample size of transcendental phenomenological studies, a purposive random

sampling method is the best option. The participants met the following criteria for eligibility in this study: (a) hold the position of school counselor, (b) work in a middle to high school setting, (c) work and reside in the United States, (d) have experience working with teen mothers in the school setting.

The study utilized participants from throughout the United States. The researcher used online databases such as Walden Participation Pool and the CESNET-L (2022), to distribute participant invitations to potential participants. Due to CESNET-L rules, the study invitation (see appendix C) was distributed once. The study invitation remained in the Walden Participation Pool for three months. The researcher also used emails to solicit the recruitment invitation to school counselors. The invitation instructed the potential participants to complete a Qualtrics demographic survey. At the end of the survey a link was provided for eligible participants to sign up for an interview time. Participants were recruited and interviewed until saturation was attained. Saturation is the point where no new data is being obtained from participants (Peoples, 2020).

### **Instrumentation**

The interview instrumentation utilized was semi-structured interviews and audio/video recording. The study sought to understand the stories and lived experiences of school counselors. Interviews let the researcher enter the perspective of others and gather their stories (Patton, 2015). The researcher kept the interview time between 20-40 minutes and followed the interview guide (see Appendix B) to help direct the interview. Probing was utilized to manage the conversation, ask for more detail, keep the interview on target, or ask for clarification (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Examples of probes that were

used are (a) Can you give me an example? (b) Go on...(c) Could you explain? While the use of probes will be infrequent, their use may lead to deeper understandings of the participant's perspective (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Audio recordings were transcribed, and the resulting transcription was used for interview analysis. The analysis process included reviewing the transcribed audio recordings. This will ensure that the researcher remembers important details and does not confuse words or remarks from the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures that research studies abide by proper ethical protections. These protections are put in place to protect the study participants and researchers from harm (Peoples, 2020). The recruitment and participation procedures were set in place to ensure ethical compliance.

To identify potential participants, the researcher distributed study participation invitations through the Walden Participation Pool and CESNET-L listservs. Interested participants accessed the included link to the consent form. Once the participant has digitally acknowledged and accepted the consent form, they were led to complete the demographic form and schedule their interview time. The demographic form ensured that the client met the participant requirements of: holds the position as school counselor, working in the middle or high school setting, work and reside in the United States, and have experience working with teen mothers in the school setting. Participation registration stalled after four interviews. The researcher gained Walden University IRB approval to include emailing school counselors to further distribute the research

invitation. Snowball sampling was another alternative to increase participation. Snowball sampling is asking those who have already participated for referrals to people with similar experiences (Peoples, 2020).

The guide to ethical principles relies on autonomy, justice, and beneficence (Gupta, 2017). To guarantee these ethical principles, research participants were provided with a statement describing the studies intent, purpose, potential risk factors, confidentiality, and measures to protect privacy (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Preceding the demographic form and scheduling their interview, the participants can review the consent form for the study and acknowledge their agreement with study participation. With full knowledge of the study's intent and purpose, the participants had the right to autonomy and could exit the research study at any time. The researcher ensured fair treatment, confidentiality, and goodwill for all participants.

Interviews conducted by the researcher were the source of data collection. Participants participated in one 20–40-minute semistructured individual interview. The interview was conducted via the HIPPA compliant, Zoom platform. Zoom is a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service that offers secure online meetings and secure recording of sessions including real-time encryption of meetings (Zoom Video Communications; 2016). Participants were assigned a random participant ID to maintain confidentiality. The participants were asked questions that addressed their knowledge of the ASCA National Model, their influence and understanding of the application of the model to teen mothers, and other questions to help gain insight and understanding to their



lived experiences in utilizing the ASCA National Model to address positive social-emotional outcomes for teen mothers.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The research participants participated in semi-structured individual interviews. Screening measures included demographic questions to ensure that all participants met the inclusion criteria of the study. Participant interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, a HIPPA compliant platform (Zoom, 2021).

To begin the phenomenological analysis, the researcher engaged in bracketing, the process of suspending the researcher's own beliefs to study the reality of everyday life (Patton, 2015). In an effort to reflect on the interview data, the researcher transcribed the audio/video recordings and reflected on the meaning of the data gained (Roulston, 2006). In compliance with phenomenological traditions, the researcher worked to reduce data by eliminating repetitive statements and data irrelevant to the phenomenon of focus (Roulston, 2006).

Qualitative research involves seeing the world from the participant's view. The process of qualitative analysis involves interpreting the raw data collected through participant interviews into a presentation for others to read and learn from (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using manual coding (Patton, 2015). Coding refers to the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants' narratives and interpreted by the researcher and moves through five phases which are compiling data, disassembling data, reassembling data, interpreting data, and concluding (Yin, 2016;

Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher analyzed the raw data by using the modified Van Kaam method. Moustakas outlined seven modified steps of the Van Kaam method which include horizontalization, reduction and elimination, categorization, application and validation, textual descriptions, structural descriptions, and composite descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). There are nine steps identified in this coding method. I began with the first step of horizontalization by listing and highlighting all relevant quotes from the interview transcriptions. The second step of reduction and elimination was used by applying the identified quotes to the research question. Next, I explored latent meanings that expressed experiences for each participant. I followed this step by checking themes against data by making sure the themes represented the participants experiences and their stories. The following steps included describing verbatim quotes and emotional quotes for each individual and theme. Codes were developed using an iterative process of reading, focused coding, reflection, writing, and rereading (Roulston, 2006).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility is done to ensure that research does not present distorted or prejudiced information (Patton, 1999). To ensure that the research findings are credible, I used member checking, a term commonly used to describe how a researcher checks in with study participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Member checking involves verifying data, findings, and interpretations with the participants of the study (Patton, 2015). Member checking was utilized by providing the participants with summaries of their interview answers and ensuring that the researcher accurately reflects and resonates with

their perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Prolonged engagement and observation are additional methods used to ensure credibility. The interviews averaged around 20-40 minutes, which allowed for the participants to build trust and relax creating a more intimate environment to openly discuss interview questions and reduce inconsistencies between participant answers and true beliefs (Patton, 1999; Peoples, 2020).

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the way in which qualitative studies can be applicable, or transferable to broader contexts while maintaining their context specific rich data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Insights found by researching the lived experiences of these participants may resonate with other populations who have similar experiences. The unique experiences described by middle and high school counselors in the United States may not translate to other school counselors in other geographical regions, but some of the experiences described during the study may be applicable in other demographics.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability of research findings over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The aspect of consistency is important when creating dependability in a study. This study used audit trails to increase dependability. Audit trails document the course of development of the completed analysis (Carcary, 2009). I created an audit trail by rationalizing research method, participant selection, reflective journaling, and reviewing transcripts. Member checking was used by e-mailing the participants with summaries of their interview answers and giving them the opportunity to ensure transcript accuracy.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the research findings represent clearly derived data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher used an audit trail to confirm the data. An audit trail is a method derived from financial audits, which requires the auditor to document the course of development of the completed analysis (Carcary, 2009). The use of an intellectual audit trail provides assistance for the researcher to reflect on the evolution of thoughts throughout the study (Carcary, 2009). Utilizing the audit trail will require reflections of the researcher's philosophical position and approach to data collection and analysis (Carcary, 2009). These steps help to ensure that the research findings are grounded in logical data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

## **Ethical Procedures**

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulated the ethical procedures of this study. The study maintained minimal risks to participants due to the researcher not utilizing members of vulnerable populations or exploring sensitive topics. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. If a participant chose to withdraw from the study, any data provided by that participant would be destroyed. Participant data will be stored on an encrypted, password-protected USB drive stored in a locked safe with the researcher having sole access to the device. The privacy of the participants will be upheld by removing names and replacing them with codes. The stored data will be destroyed after five years.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the specific plan for this qualitative phenomenological research study. The rationale of the research design, the role of the researcher, the methodology, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were detailed. In Chapter 4, the setting, demographics, data collected, and results of the study will be described.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aims to explore and bring understanding to the role of school counselors and their social-emotional work with adolescent mothers. After reviewing the literature, I found limited research identifying the impact of school counseling on psychosocial interventions on the social emotional development of teen mothers and their educational attainment. Therefore, I conducted this study aiming to explore and bring understanding to the role of school counselors and their social-emotional work with adolescent mothers. The primary research question was: What are school counselors' lived experience in providing social-emotional support for adolescent mothers?

In Chapter 4, I present the demographics of participants, data collection methods, and findings of the study. A discussion of the data analysis procedures and evidence of trustworthiness is also included.

### **Demographics**

Participants were required to meet the inclusion criteria of holding the position as a school counselor, working as a middle or high school counselor, working, and residing in the United States, and experience working with teen mothers in the school setting. I excluded any school counselors that did not meet this inclusion criteria. Two participants were excluded from the results as one withdrew and the other was unable to schedule due to a scheduling conflict. This study resulted in participants who spanned from 0-11 years of experience. All participants were women ages 59 or less years of age (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Years of Experience	Grade Level	State	Gender	Race	Age
Participant 1	4-7 Years	High School	SC	F	B	40-49
Participant 2	0-3 Years	High School	CO	F	W	30-39
Participant 3	0-3 Years	High School	MD	F	B	29 or less
Participant 4	5-7 Years	Middle School	AL	F	W	30-39
Participant 5	4-7 Years	Middle School	GA	F	B	30-39
Participant 6	8-11 Years	Middle School	AL	F	B	50-59

**Data Collection**

I was granted IRB approval for this study August 16, 2023 with the Walden University approval number of 08-16-23-1009647. The initial request for participation was posted on August 16, 2023. Requests for participation were posted on the Walden University Participant Pool and sent once to the CESNET listserv on August 17, 2023. A total of six semi-structured interviews were completed through the data collection process. Interested individuals were able to complete the demographic screener utilizing a Qualtrics link included on the call for participation. Participants that met the requirements and agreed to the online study consent form were then forwarded to a Doodle link to schedule their Zoom interview. Doodle is described as a free, bare-bones survey site that is used to schedule meetings (McAndrews, 2009).

All data was collected using the Qualtrics link and one-on-one Zoom interviews. A total of six individual interviews were conducted. Each interview was conducted via the Zoom platform and lasted between 30-40 minutes. These interviews were recorded

using a digital voice recorder and Zoom record function. Interviews were transcribed by an automated transcription service, and I checked for accuracy of these transcriptions. These transcriptions were stored on an encrypted flash drive only accessible by the researcher. Prior to each interview I engaged in bracketing by reflecting upon personal values and assumptions associated with school counselors and adolescent mothers based on my work as a licensed professional counselor. These values and assumptions were addressed by mindful meditation and a review of the interview questions, purpose of the study, and interview guide to ground the researcher into the study. During each interview, the researcher took field notes throughout the process. After two months of data collection the researcher identified some difficulty getting more participants. This resulted in a revision to the IRB on October 10, 2023, to include distributing the request for participation via email to school districts in the United States. There were no other unusual circumstances or variations made to the data collection plan. Once each interview was complete, it was automatically transcribed using a HIPAA compliant transcription service. The researcher then read the transcripts, edited them for accuracy, compared the transcripts to the field notes, and used the Walden University student email account to provide individual copies of the transcripts to the participants. All field notes were kept in a locked office solely used by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

This data analysis aimed to create structural descriptions, a collection of qualities that create themes, of the experiences of school counselors' roles in working with adolescent mothers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my first step in analyzing data, I began



by examining my own biases through journaling. Through the journaling process, I identified cultural and emotional biases that include my previous experience with mistreatment and lack of emotional support for teen mothers in the school setting. This allowed for me to become more aware of my experiences prior to reviewing the interview transcripts. After identifying the potential biases, I read all the transcripts in their entirety. Prior to beginning the data analysis process, member checking was used to ensure the validity of the transcriptions. Member checking includes the review of transcripts by the participant to verify accuracy (Peoples, 2020). To complete the member checking process, all participants were provided with copies of their interview transcript to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected their perspectives and experiences. During the member checking process, participants were given the opportunity to provide any additional information or change responses, but all participants approved of them as submitted. Data analysis continued with assigning each participant a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

To analyze the data and begin the coding process, I utilized the modified Van Kaam thematic coding method popularized by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas outlined seven modified steps of the Van Kaam method which include horizontalization, reduction and elimination, categorization, application and validation, textual descriptions, structural descriptions, and composite descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Horizontalization**

The process of horizontalization involves listing and grouping data into rudimentary themes (Galinha-de-Sa & Velez, 2022). Horizontalization was achieved by

reading the transcripts and gaining an understanding of the common experiences and creating six rough themes or repetitive expression: collaboration, communication, barriers to social-emotional learning, school/district resources, and school counselor role. These themes were created after reading each transcript and highlighting repeated phrases amongst participants these phrases pertained to assessment of student needs, support, communication, programming, and training.

### **Reduction and Elimination**

The following step in the van Kaam method is “Reduction and Elimination”. This step involves identifying the constant parts or experiences found in the transcripts (Galinha-de-Sa & Velez, 2022). For this step, I reduced the number of relevant quotes identified in step one by applying the quotes to the research question, ensuring that the quotes provided underlying meaning or invariant constituents. The process for this reduction included comparing the phrases identified in the previous step, to the research question with guidance from my committee chair. Another step in the reduction process included, identifying other phenomena that occurred in the experiences that could contaminate the phenomenon being studied. Some other phenomena that occurred included participants’ experiences aiding adolescent mothers beyond the scope of a school counselor. For example, some participants mentioned assisting with childcare needs and appointment scheduling. These experiences were reduced and eliminated due to not being amongst the roles of school counselors.

Lastly, after comparing the relevancy of the quotes, precise descriptive terms were identified leading to four emerging themes that aligned with the research question.

These themes were created from the descriptions of the participants' experiences that answer the research question and pertain to the role of the school counselors. These themes included: collaboration, social-emotional learning, barriers to social-emotional learning, and school counselor role.

### **Categorization and Thematization**

Categorization and thematization includes the process of analyzing the phrases to form a description of the phenomenon. This phase of the data analysis process involves grouping and classifying the precise descriptive terms identified in step two and reducing them based on two requirements: Does the expression contain an experience that can be necessary to the phenomenon and is it possible to abstract this expression and label it while preserving the meaning (Galinha-de-Sa & Velez, 2022). This step allows for the themes to really begin to come together. I assessed the data and quotes from the previous steps using a relationship matrix to draw out the participants experiences (see Appendix C). Once the experiences were visualized, I then began to find labels for these experiences by applying the requirements to each phrase and theme. The themes were then compared to the research questions, themes were eliminated if they did not align with the purpose of the study and the research questions. Elimination was determined by taking into consideration the ASCA definition and roles of school counselors, as well as comparing the described experiences to their association with social-emotional support. This step led to a three emerging themes: collaboration, barriers to social-emotional learning, and social-emotional learning activities.

## **Application and Validation**

This phase of the van Kaam method involves refining the three themes of step three to ensure the meaning and relatedness of the phenomenon. I reviewed the transcripts again to verify my previous analysis of the data. After verifying the previous analysis, I then challenged the three identified themes by using Moustakas' suggested questions for reflection, "Do the identified invariant constituents appear explicitly in the transcript?" and "Are they compatible with the whole despite not appearing explicitly in the transcript?" (Galinha-de-Sa & Velez, 2022). This was an important phase that helped identify and form the units into cohesive and meaningful themes. This phase resulted in three themes that accurately reflected the phenomenon. These themes included: importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, two sub-themes of the advantages of social-emotional learning and barriers to social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles and responsibilities.

### **Construction of Individual Textual Description**

Once the themes were verified and applied to the research questions and the purpose of the study, I began constructing the individual textual descriptions. The construction of the individual textual descriptions allows for the participant's perceptions to be formed in a narrative format. This step identified the stories of the experiences that contribute to the themes.

### **Construction of Individual Structural Description**

Building upon the previous step, I then continued to construct individual structural descriptions. Galinha-de-Sa and Velez (2022), described this phase as the

researcher's ability to provide imaginative variation. Imaginative variation is an intentional mental process or thinking of the researcher that engages in an imaginative analysis of the data (Galinha-de-Sa & Velez, 2022). This phase required me to use imagine the possible meanings of the experiences of each participant. This was done by rereading the transcripts and reviewing recordings to gain perspective of each participant's experience with the phenomenon (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). This step is important because it takes the verbatim phrases from the transcripts and applies it to each theme giving rich, thick descriptions from each participant (see Table 2).

### **Construction of Structural-Textural Description**

Lastly, textural and structural descriptions were compiled, and common themes of the phenomenon were formed. Themes are summary statements and conclusions that offer explanations of why something happened, what something means, or how the participant feels (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The data analysis resulted in three general themes: importance of collaboration & communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles & responsibility.

**Table 2***Themes Across Participants*

	Themes	Interview Quotes
Participant 1	Importance of Collaboration & Communication	“We [Multi-Tiered System of Support Team] meet once a week to figure out how we can help them and assess for student’s needs”
	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning	“Yeah, because they’re [homebound students] not answering the phone or they’re not answering the doors.” “None, unfortunately none.” [Support or training from schools or educational programs]
	Impact of School Counseling Roles & Responsibility	“One young lady, she’s lacking the amount of credits that she needs. So, I’m happy to have a conversation with her this week.” “Trying to build that relationship and just be the support and just be encouraging.”
Participant 2	Importance of Collaboration & Communication	“My colleagues are social workers hired under a separate grant and both grants have requirements for social emotional education.”
	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning	“Almost all of the students have these really complicated relationships and history, and I think social media kind of adds another layer of toxicity.” “There was a student who is a parenting student, and her boyfriend goes to the school. They’re both fantastic parents, but sometimes the relationship can kind of tilt over into a little bit unhealthy and so I did some separate work with them about healthy relationships.”
	Impact of School Counseling Roles & Responsibility	“I work on postsecondary success, mental health, social emotional education, and academic success.”
Participant 3	Importance of Collaboration & Communication	“I have a colleague that I work with pretty closely, who per position is truancy, but she is very great at knowing what organizations and resources to provide for students that are expecting mothers.” “The school doesn’t really address it [teen moms]. My school does not address preventative measures.”
	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning	“So I really had to address a student’s confidence where either why they are participating in sexual acts or if they truly do not want, because they don’t understand the concept of consent and the ability to say no, because I am battling with them their self-esteem.”
	Impact of School Counseling Roles & Responsibility	“I’ve always maintained open communication and honesty, and I always reinforce that my kids can tell me anything, but just be aware of the rules.”
Participant 4	Importance of Collaboration & Communication	“Collaborating with those stakeholders and then obviously the student herself, and say you’re expecting this, what can I do to help?”
	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning	“So, whether that’s communicating with their parents or communicating with their teachers or our administrators, just because in the school setting, I don’t work with any one student all day every day.” “I’m not a hundred percent sure how to respond [to pregnant students].”
	Impact of School Counseling Roles & Responsibility	“So just offering support to the student in that moment to help them kind of calm down and get out of that frantic mindset.”
Participant 5	Importance of Collaboration & Communication	“Setting up and advocating for that information [teen pregnancy] to get to them [students] and to their parents too.” “It’s up to the counselor and the social worker and the admin team to determine if that kid can return [to school]. Home life, grades, childcare, the

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		father, and grandparents are used to assess the student and their return to school.”
	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning	They [school district] actually had a teen mom program. It [former teen parenting program] was in place for maybe about 10 to 15 years. It was really successful but funding, the funding stopped.”
	Impact of School Counseling Roles & Responsibility	“Daily mental health check-ins. Really just making those connections so that incase anything comes up, they know they can talk to us.” “I am making sure that they have all the resources that they need and that the school system is setting them up to go beyond.”
Participant 6	Implementing Social-Emotional Learning	“There used to be a program for MPS [Montgomery Public Schools]. They no longer have it. I’m sure it is because of funding that supported teen moms.”
		“I work on the fact that you are a parent. You have to show good examples for your child and making sure you set those boundaries.”

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## Evidence of Trustworthiness

### Credibility

Credibility is done to ensure that research does not present distorted or prejudiced information (Patton, 1999). To ensure that the research findings are credible, I used member checking, a term commonly used to describe how a researcher checks in with study participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Member checking involved verifying data, findings, and interpretations with the participants of the study (Peoples, 2020). Member checking was conducted by e-mailing the participants their transcripts and ensuring that the data accurately reflects and resonates with their perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### Transferability

Transferability is the way in which qualitative studies can be applicable, or transferable to broader contexts while maintaining their context specific rich data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Phenomenological inquiry is described as the meaning, structure, and essence of a person or groups lived experiences of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The

nature of phenomenological research creates restrictions of its transferability. The unique experiences described by middle and high school counselors in the United States may not translate to other school counselors in other geographical regions, but some of the experiences described during the study may be applicable in other demographics. Insights found by researching the lived experiences of these participants may resonate with other populations who have similar experiences and inform their work with adolescent mothers.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability of research findings over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The aspect of consistency is important when creating dependability in a study. I began by creating an interview guide that was followed for each interview. Each question was asked in the same order for all participants. Next, I used audit trails to further increase dependability. Audit trails document the course of development of the completed analysis (Carcary, 2009). I created an audit trail by documenting the steps included in the van Kaam data analysis method, along with reflective journaling to document the decision-making process. Member checking was used by e-mailing the participants with summaries of their interview answers and giving them the opportunity to ensure transcript accuracy. The interview and data analysis process was monitored by the committee chair

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability establishes that data and interpretations of the research findings represent clearly imitative data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Before each interview, I



reviewed the interview questions, kept a hard copy of the interview questions during the interview, and took field notes during each interview to enhance my neutrality. To protect the analysis from researcher bias, I used the van Kaam data analysis method to properly review and analyze the data. This method of data analysis requires several readings of the data allowing the researcher to reduce researcher bias. An audit trail including the decision-making process and reflective journaling was also used to reduce researcher bias. An audit trail is a method derived from financial audits, which requires the auditor to document the course of development of the completed analysis (Carcary, 2009). The use of an intellectual audit trail provides assistance for the researcher to reflect on the evolution of thoughts throughout the study (Carcary, 2009). Using the audit trail, I reflected of my philosophical position and approach to data collection and analysis (Carcary, 2009). These steps help to ensure that the research findings are grounded in logical data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

## **Results**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was to gain understanding of school counselors' lived experiences providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. As a result of the study three themes arose during the data analysis. These themes included the importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and the impact of school counseling roles and responsibilities. These themes repeated throughout each of the interviews. The themes came from the research question of what are school counselors' lived experiences in providing social-emotional support for adolescent mothers.

### **Importance of Collaboration and Communication**

Collaboration was a major theme identified by each of the participants during their interviews. Collaboration was described by 5 out of the 6 participants as having a designated support team at their school to assist in providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. These support teams met to improve the student's academic and social emotional success. These teams consist of school counselors, district social workers, administrators, parents, and teachers. Participants described the support teams as helpful in improving their social-emotional responses to adolescent mothers, often when there is no definite program or protocol established within the school system. Participant 1 described a multi-tiered system of support that meets weekly to discuss academic and behavior for identified students. Participant 1 continued to describe this meeting as a way for the school to assess academic and social-emotional needs for adolescent mothers, despite there not being any programs specifically for adolescent mothers. Participant 4 described benefits of utilizing collaboration to gain insight on the students' academic and social-emotional needs. This collaboration between the administrators, teachers, and school counselors increases their support and ability to engage in social-emotional learning activities.

### **Implementing Social-Emotional Learning**

The second theme to develop from the data analysis is implementing social-emotional learning. Some of the social-emotional learning needs that emerged from the data analysis included responsible decision-making, goal achievement, relationship skills, student observation, and managing emotions. Each participant discussed various methods

and barriers to their ability in addressing the social-emotional learning needs of their students.

### **Advantages of Social-Emotional Learning**

Advantages to social-emotional learning included participant's describing efforts to improve responsible decision-making and emotional regulation for students.

Participant 5 discussed increasing responsible decision making for her adolescent mothers. She described an incident where a fight broke out at school and the pregnant adolescent mother went to watch the fight and was hit in the stomach during the fight. Participant 5 discussed safety and responsibility concerns with the student to ensure her safety. Participant 2 reflected on student observations and emotional regulation for adolescent mothers and fathers through a community approach of social-emotional learning. She stated, "Advisory is our heartbeat. In that space, students are evaluated, but also just really encouraged to have a network of people that can support them, including their advisors." Lastly, Participant 6 expressed their methods of improving relationship skills for her students and their families. Participant 6 described this as making sure they know how to set boundaries and being responsible.

### **Barriers To Social-Emotional Learning**

All participants discussed a desire to aid adolescent mothers in their social-emotional learning development but have also experienced barriers to effectively providing social-emotional learning services to adolescent mothers. The last theme that developed was barriers to social-emotional learning.

Participant 1 stated that their school places adolescent mothers on a homebound learning program. When discussing homebound learning, Participant 1 mentioned that this creates a barrier to identifying social-emotional needs, of adolescent mothers, “I’m noticing the communication is little to non-existent sometimes.” Participant 1 continued to state, “I’ve noticed that it has taken an effect on schoolwork. Schoolwork is not getting completed.” Participant 1 stated that she was particularly thinking of one of her current students where there is a delay in services due to homebound learning and states that, “She’s lacking the amount of credits that she needs. So, I’m happy to have conversation with her and help her kick it into high gear.” Participant 3 also discussed difficulties with addressing social-emotional learning needs to adolescent mothers due to adolescent mothers being placed outside of the school. In addition to student’s being distant due to homebound services, Participant 5 and Participant 6 both identified financial concerns that limit the ability to properly address social-emotional needs for adolescent mothers. Participant 5 discussed a teen mom program that began in her school district in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The program lasted for 10-15 years before losing funding. Participant 5 discussed having a coworker that utilized the program before it ended. Participant 5 detailed the following:

To see, hey, I went through the program, and this is what happened to me, and it was successful and just to learn about it from her as a student who went through it, it works. Programs like that work.

Participant 6 continued this thought that teen mom programs within the school districts work. Participant 6 stated that, “There used to be a program, they no longer have it I’m

sure because of funding, that supported teen moms.” Participant 6 also identified a barrier with her role in the school. Participant 6 described this barrier as:

We have the opportunity to do just that [provide social-emotional learning]. We should not be building test coordinators. We shouldn't be the lead of any committees in the school because being a counselor is a lot, and there are only eight hours in the day. So, I think if we could just concentrate on just the students, that we would have more time and ability to touch a lot more.

Overall participants share the barriers of distance due to alternative school or homebound placement. Other barriers including the school counselor roles in the school system and financial barriers, where school districts had established programs for adolescent mothers, but the programs lost funding and were shut down without any replacement social-emotional support options.

### **Impact of School Counseling Roles and Responsibilities**

The final theme that emerged during this study was the role of school counselor. Each participant expressed aspects of their role as a school counselor in their interviews. Some participants highlighted their support of students' development, while others emphasized their work to provide data-informed programs and advocacy. Participant 2 summarized her work with adolescent mothers as follows:

It's [attending college] a huge part of life and development that they have to miss out on and so creating programs and experiences that help them

figure out what they want for their life and for their children, it's really important to me, which is why we focus so heavily on that here.

Participant 1 described her role as a school counselor as, "being there to advocate for students. The motto in my district this year is, all means all. Even our pregnant homebound students." Participant 4 also expressed thoughts of student advocacy by stating, "I think the support system is huge. And then the counselor advocating for that student, but then also encouraging that student to advocate for themselves."

Most participants expressed a strong desire for advocacy and programming for adolescent mothers, they also identified limitations to their ability to complete these portions of their role as school counselors. Participant 1 shared that, "we deal with so many things on a day-to-day basis. Adolescent mothers get pushed to the back burner." Participant 5 described a limitation in her ability to perform her role as a school counselor when pregnancies are hidden. Participant 5 summarized her experience by stating, "Her parents took her away from us [the school], I would say in February. That is when the bump started to show. She came back, no bump. She was gone for about, I would say, until May."

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I discussed the demographics of participants, data collection methods, and study findings. The data analysis process concluded three common themes,

importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles and responsibilities.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings of the study and how they connect to the current literature. I will also explain limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. Lastly, I will include implications for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study explored and brought understanding to the role of school counselors and their social-emotional work with adolescent mothers. Transcendental phenomenology was used to address the detailed description of the experiences of school counselors who work with adolescent mothers. Three themes developed from the study: importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles and responsibilities. The primary research question that guided this study was: What are school counselors' lived experiences in providing social-emotional support for adolescent mothers? The subsequent question for the study was: How do school counselors' lived experiences working with adolescent mothers inform their roles, as defined by the ASCA National Model?

In Chapter 5, I discuss the research findings of this study and their relation to the literature, the limitations of this study, and recommendations for future research. I will also discuss the implications for positive social change and conclude with a summary of the study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was developed to explore the lived experiences of school counselors' providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. Scholars confirmed the issues related to adolescent mothers and their educational attainment, the impact of social-emotional learning, and the role of school counselors. Research discussed the use of preventative teen pregnancy programs and a



few specialized programs for teen mothers throughout the United States, but there remains a lack of efficient programs and procedures for providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. While the literature review did highlight concerns about how social-emotional learning is addressed for adolescent mothers, this study explored the experiences of school counselors and their efforts to address the needs of their adolescent mothers and barriers to addressing these needs. The following three themes: importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles and responsibilities help to confirm and extend the knowledge found in previous literature.

### **Importance of Collaboration and Communication**

Scholars described the benefits of collaboration and communication when addressing the social emotional needs of adolescent mothers (Dowden, et. al., 2018). The literature suggests that adolescent mothers will have more positive experiences during their educational attainment with the use of a positive support networks, appropriate social-emotional learning activities, and school counselor input (Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2015; van Vugt & Versteegh, 2020). Participant 4 identified how creating a positive support network helps to address student concerns. She stated, “There are 499 seventh graders at my school, they might not know that I’m a school counselor. So, I think oftentimes making sure that we bring teachers in because the teachers see those kids every day.” To further support the importance of collaboration and communication, Garney et al. (2019) identified that collaboration with community public health programs and school districts are effective in implementing teenage pregnancy prevention

programs. The findings of this study confirm that the use of collaboration and communication within the school system and community partners is an important part of addressing the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers.

### **Implementing Social-Emotional Learning**

Literature suggests the benefits of social-emotional learning programs. Stevens (2021) identified that social-emotional learning programs that are developed by school counselors are able to increase students' growth, success, and educational outcomes through the support of student development and creating a positive school climate. This study revealed subthemes of the implementation of social-emotional learning including advantages and barriers.

### **Advantages of Social-Emotional Learning**

Elias et al. (1997) described social-emotional development as the development of the ability to manage emotions, set and achieve goals, appreciate care and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and deal constructively with interpersonal situations. Participant 2 works at a local charter school for parenting and pregnant teens funded by their school district. This school incorporates a social-emotional learning program that includes self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. Participant 2 states that, "Students do a graduation story. An autobiography and self-awareness piece identifying where they have come from, who they are now, and gauges their level of emotional maturity." Participant 3 described their impact on social-emotional learning as helping students understand the concept of consent and their ability to say 'no' while increasing self-esteem.

### **Barriers to Social-Emotional Learning**

Literature has continued to make suggestions on the barriers to social-emotional learning. Eighty percent of adolescent students from diverse backgrounds are found to lack many of the identified core social-emotional skills decreasing their ability to create and identify safe and enriching environments (Jacob & Philip, 2022). During this study, several barriers to social-emotional learning were identified also. In response to the effectiveness of her social-emotional learning program, Participant 3 stated, “It depends heavily on the family’s financial standing. My county is a very rural, poor area. They themselves are being raised by single moms and will drop out to go get a job to care for their baby.” While research has expressed the benefits of schools including alternative methods for teen parents, many participants discussed difficulty to do this in their district (Einhorn, 2015 & Brouwer et al., 2018). Participant 5 and Participant 6 both identified teen parenting program closures due to lack of funding. Participant 6 reflected on a past teen parenting program, “It was called Neely Blige, it was a very long time ago, but I know that program is not here now. I know they stopped because of funding.”

### **Impact of School Counseling Roles and Responsibility**

Literature acknowledges the shift in roles and responsibilities of school counselors throughout history to incorporate a framework that establishes counseling services to students (Gysbers, 2010). Recent literature suggests that culturally responsive school leadership framework encourages social justice and education equity. This framework also alters the school counselor role to include leadership, advocacy, and self-awareness of their own personal biases and values (Shell, 2021). Four out of the six

participants expressed a strong leadership framework. Participant 1 and Participant 5 identified a leadership framework to make informed decisions for adolescent parents that included administrators, teachers, and school counselors to address educational and social-emotional needs for these students.

Lastly, each participant commented on the importance of their role in addressing the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers. This is in alignment with Havlik et al. (2019) who identified that it is the responsibility of the school counselor to advocate for their appropriate role in the school to reduce role ambiguity and to define the value and responsibilities of school counselors within the school system. The barrier of advocating for appropriate school counselor responsibilities was mirrored in the comment by Participant 6, “We [school counselors] should not be building test coordinators. We shouldn’t be the lead of any committees in the school. If we could concentrate on just the students, we would have more time and ability to touch a lot more.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation identified is a lack of transferability due to regional locations. This study collected data from six participants throughout the United States. The presented data only reflects the nature of school counseling in the United States. Furthermore, each school district varies greatly. The participant experiences captured in this study may not apply to other school counselors in other school districts. Another limitation presents due to the qualitative nature of the study. While the study provides in-depth understanding of the six school counseling participants this limited sample size reduces the generalizability of this study.

## Recommendations

Throughout this study, I noticed a strong desire for participants to provide social-emotional support to their students who are adolescent mothers. The participants also discussed barriers that prevent them from fully providing the support they want to provide their adolescent mothers. There are several recommendations that can support research for increased school counselor support and adolescent pregnancy training.

The first recommendation is in the area of research. Five out of six participants shared that there is no designated protocol for addressing the needs of adolescent mothers. The results of this study lead me to suggest more research to capture the experiences of more school counselors and their response to the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers. School counselors are tasked with designing and implementing culturally responsive programs to improve student outcomes. Hilts et al. (2022) found that increased emotional intelligence of school counselors improves the ability for school counselors to engage in transformational leadership and comprehensive school counseling implementation. Further research on this topic across other regions will help to inform program planning to better the responses to the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers.

During this study, the possibility of a new phenomenon associated with the support of school counselors began to emerge. Some of the participants discussed supporting students beyond the ASCA defined roles of school counselors. While this study focused on how school counselors provide social-emotional needs according to the ASCA definition there is need for continued research on the experiences of school

counselors and their efforts to provide support beyond their defined roles. This continuation of research may provide more information on program planning needs for adolescent mothers and school district support for school counselors.

Another recommendation is the area of school counselor support. All the participants mentioned how helpful collaboration is with working with adolescent mothers. The participants identified collaborating with other stakeholders in the school and sharing information between colleagues. Therefore, my next recommendation is to increase the support resources for school counselors to address the unique social-emotional learning needs of adolescent mothers. Bohnenkamp et al. (2023) supported the importance of genuine cross-system partnerships, particularly within mental health. The study continued to find importance of multi-tiered systems of support to improve the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning high risk students (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023). A defined support system that informs how the school counselor can address these particular social-emotional needs may increase the response and learning of crucial social-emotional skills for adolescent mothers.

Lastly, all participants discussed having no training on addressing the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers. All participants discussed no mention of adolescent mothers in their formal education or continuing education training. My last recommendation is for the use of needs assessments to adopt formalized trainings for school counselors' response to adolescent mothers in the school system. Utilizing needs assessments allows school counselors to put learned theories into practice and evolving for areas of need within their schools (Vargas et al., 2023). To help increase training

opportunities, I suggest that knowledgeable counselors and counselor educators provide support to current counselors through professional development through conferences or direct trainings with school districts.

### **Implications**

After conducting this study, implications for social change developed. I sought to address the gap in literature of the experiences of school counselors providing social-emotional support to adolescent mothers. Through exploring this research topic, I sought to implicate positive social change in the social-emotional support that adolescent mothers receive from school counselors. Insights from this study can aid school counselors in seeking more training on the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers. Additionally, this study can inform school counselors with ideas on how to use available resources, such as colleagues and local community resources to advocate for their students who are adolescent mothers.

### **Conclusion**

School counselors have a professional standard to ensure that they are equipped to establish, maintain, and enhance a comprehensive school counseling program addressing academic achievement, career planning, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2019). The study results highlighted the experiences of school counselors and their support of the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers. The lived experiences from this study included thick, rich detailed descriptions of the six school counselors to increase the knowledge and awareness of how school counselors address the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers, barriers to addressing the social-emotional needs

of adolescent mothers and identifying opportunities for school counselor support in this role.

From this research three major themes emerged: importance of collaboration and communication, implementing social-emotional learning, and impact of school counseling roles and responsibility. The themes that result from this study confirmed that many school counselors felt inadequate training and lack of support from school districts in addressing the needs of adolescent mothers. The results also found a strong desire for these school counselors to support the social-emotional learning needs of students despite their lack of training and school support.



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## Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

1. How long have you practiced as a school counselor?
  - a. 0-3 years
  - b. 4-7 years
  - c. 8-11 years
  - d. 12-15 years
  - e. Over 15 years
2. What grade level describes your current role as a school counselor?
  - a. Middle School Counselor
  - b. High School Counselor
3. Do you have experience working with adolescent mothers?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. What state is your current school located?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your age range?
  - a. 29 or younger
  - b. 30-39
  - c. 40-49
  - d. 50-59
  - e. 60 or older
6. What is your race/ethnicity?
  - a. White
  - b. Black or African American
  - c. American Indian or Alaskan
  - d. Asian
  - e. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - f. Hispanic
  - g. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your gender?
  - a. Woman
  - b. Man
  - c. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Interview Question Guide

1. What are your personal experiences in working with adolescent mothers?
  
2. Describe a time when you provided social-emotional support to adolescent mothers.
  
3. When working with students who are adolescent mothers, how do you assess their social-emotional health and their needs?
  
4. Describe the current school counseling programs that have been established in your school to specifically address the social-emotional needs of adolescent mothers.
  - a. What process was involved in creating a program or implementing strategies that were tailored to the needs of these students?
  
  - b. How effective have these programs been in supporting the social-emotional development of these students?
  
5. Tell me about the support or training that you received to properly work with adolescent mothers?
  
  
6. What else would you like to share regarding school counselors and supporting the social-emotional needs of students who are adolescent mothers?

### Appendix C: Example of Relationship Matrix

