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School Counselor's Experiences in Providing Services to High School Students Enrolled in Accelerated Academic Programs

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College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Pamela D. Gardner

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

School Counselors' Experiences in Providing Services to High School Students Enrolled

in Accelerated Academic Programs

by

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MS, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, 1995

BS, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, 1984

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Students enrolled in accelerated academic programs are not immune to mental health concerns that other students may face. Despite the increasing evidence that perfectionism is correlated with psychological distress among adolescents, there is a gap in the literature on how interventions developed for use in adolescent populations may affect this relationship. Knowledge of the influence, if any, of interventions may help school counselors to better understand these students' experiences and counseling requirements. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to learn more about counselors' experiences with students in accelerated academic programs. The participants comprised eight counselors recruited from a school district in the U.S. state of Virginia who had at least 2 years of experience and provided services to high school students engaged in accelerated academic programs. Interviews were conducted for data collection purposes. Data analysis involved note-taking and reviewing the transcribed interviews. Through this process, four themes surfaced: intensity, parallel process, feelings of being undervalued, and internalized sense of satisfaction. Based on the four themes that surfaced, it is recommended that counselor educators take a more holistic approach to supporting students in accelerated academic programs. This may involve providing additional resources and support systems to help students manage the intensity of the program and the parallel process of balancing coursework with other responsibilities. With greater understanding of the needs of students in accelerated academic programs, counselor educators may be better able to effectively support these students.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Edgar L. Gardner Sr. and Mary Ray Gardner. At an early age, my parents instilled in my siblings and me the importance of education and putting forth our best effort. My mother provided constant support and encouragement to get me to this point until her passing. In addition, this dissertation is dedicated to my siblings, Wanda, Edgar Jr., Charlene, Lisa, and Michelle. Also, to my nephew Torance, who provided encouragement, offered to read my drafts and provided feedback and always told me, "You got this." A special thank you to my adopted big sister, Rosetta who was one of my biggest cheerleaders, who always told me I could do it. Finally, to my friends, my sorority sisters, Link sisters; and everyone who believed in me and supported me throughout this journey. When I felt like giving up, your daily and weekly calls, encouragement, and support helped me persevere. I love each of you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

With today's startling increase in young people's mental health needs, the role of the school counselor is crucial in meeting students' needs and supporting students who are having a difficult time coping with stress and managing psychological issues (Byrne et al., 2020; McGowan, 2021). School counselors have experience in individual counseling, group counseling, career counseling, support in the classroom, collaboration, leadership, and advocacy (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). The ASCA (2019) concluded that it is school counselors' responsibility to promote mental health, social development, and achievement of all students, including high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs.

Engaging effectively with high school students in accelerated academic programs can be challenging for school counselors because these students experience more stress than their peers who are not in accelerated academic programs (Suldo et al., 2018). Students in accelerated academic programs are high-achieving students and are typically a population to whom school counselors are unprepared to provide counseling services (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2018). Lack of adequate training is an issue; school counselors are required to provide several school services, many of which are not consistent with their education and training (Collins, 2014; Kim & Lambie, 2018; McCormac, 2016).

Serving other students in an effective manner is also a current challenge of school counselors. Obstacles include an increased number of services needed, reduced access to community mental health, and high school counselor caseloads (Erford, 2019). Schools

play a crucial role in the processes of prevention, diagnosis, intervention, and referral for youth mental health services (Wissow et al., 2016). They serve as the main gateway for accessing these services, making it essential for educators to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and resources to identify and address mental health concerns among students. By prioritizing mental health support in schools, we can ensure that young people receive the care they need to thrive and succeed both academically and personally. Although school-age children's emotional and mental health needs are increasing, in the United States youth community mental health services are declining and underfunded, putting increased pressure on schools to address students' mental health needs (Lambie et al., 2019).

Research on the experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs may have implications for positive social change. Specifically, the results could help counselors identify and address the mental health needs of students who are enrolled in accelerated academic programs. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study I conducted to address the research problem. Along with the nature of the study, I will discuss its background, state the research problem and purpose, present the research question, discuss the theoretical framework in this chapter, and define key terms. In addition, the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study will be discussed.

Background

Research indicates that students who are enrolled in accelerated programs often face unique challenges, such as enrollment in multiple advanced-level courses, increased

stress levels, and psychological problems, when compared to students enrolled in regular education classes (Suldo et al., 2015). At this time, there is a gap in the literature related to school counselors' perspectives on providing services to high school students who are participating in accelerated academic learning programs. I explored the experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs to increase the understanding of that phenomenon. This study was needed because understanding the experiences of school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs may lead to a better understanding of these students' experiences and counseling needs.

Problem Statement

The problem that I addressed in this study is that even though high school students in accelerated academic programs have had more academic success than their peers, they are not immune to mental health issues. One in six U.S. children have been diagnosed with a mental illness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). A growing number of students are contending with problems related to mental health issues such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Wissow et al., 2016). Other complex issues that students bring to school include divorce, poverty, homelessness, violence, bullying, and health concerns (Jones, 2020). The ASCA (2019) noted that school counselors recognize that their work requires providing counseling services to students with mental health issues; however, they often encounter time constraints or a lack of resources to meet students' needs.

The ASCA and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) play crucial roles in the training and professional development of school counselors. Although CACREP accreditation ensures that programs meet certain criteria related to counselor training, the standards may not specifically address the needs of accelerated learners. As a result, counselor education programs may not prioritize training in this area unless it aligns with broader CACREP standards (CACREP, 2009).

School counselor preparation programs emphasize the development of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential for the implementation of effective school counseling programs. In addition to standards for school counseling coursework, the CACREP standards address faculty requirements, credit-hour and internship requirements, student and faculty evaluation, and other issues related to the program (CACREP, 2009). The ASCA standards address student knowledge only, recognizing that every community and every program is different. Programs seeking national ASCA recognition are free to develop programs at their discretion to ensure candidates meet the competencies outlined in the standards' rubrics using six to eight assessments (ASCA, 2021).

Although the ASCA standards bear some similarities to sections of the CACREP standards, the ASCA standards focus on the essential knowledge and skills necessary to be a successful school counselor. The CACREP standards do not address the critical role of a comprehensive school counseling program in serving all students, nor do they fully address the unique role of school counselors distinct from the roles of clinical counselors. In the view of the ASCA, school counselors practice counseling and are well versed in

mental health issues; however, these counselors work in education rather than a counseling profession, with more profound differences than the work setting. School counselors' role as educators does not diminish the importance of school counseling in student mental health and wellness or the need for school counselors to be knowledgeable about mental health issues (ASCA, 2021)

School counselors play a vital role in ensuring that students have wonderful educational experiences. Counselors provide critical socioemotional and academic support. The ASCA National Model recommends that schools maintain a ratio of 250 students per school counselor and that counselors spend 80% of their time working directly with students (ASCA, 2019). In 2019, the average student-to-school counselor ratio for high schools was 311 to 1. The ASCA (2019) recommended that the role of the school counselor be addressed, and additional training be offered, which could lead to developing mastery in providing services to accelerated students. Simply put, there need to be more school counselors to meet the needs of students, especially those students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. The ASCA could work with the CACREP to ensure that counseling programs are offering courses and training to students that focus on mental health and working with students in accelerated or gifted programs.

Even with increasing evidence that perfectionism is correlated with psychological distress among adolescents, there is a gap in the literature in that few researchers have explored this relationship with interventions developed for use in adolescent populations. O'Connor et al. (2010) investigated the degree to which perfectionism and acute life stress predict depression, anxiety, and self-harm among adolescents. The aspects of

perfectionism are known to be correlated with psychological stress, which can significantly impact adolescent mental health. Therefore, developing enhanced therapeutic approaches that focus specifically on addressing adolescent perfectionism can be beneficial in treating psychological morbidity in this population. By tailoring interventions to address the unique challenges associated with perfectionism, therapists can help young people develop healthier coping mechanisms and improve their overall well-being.

Purpose of the Study

Research indicates that students who are enrolled in accelerated programs often face unique challenges, such as enrollment in multiple advanced-level courses, increased stress levels, and psychological problems, when compared to students enrolled in regular education classes (Suldo et al., 2018). To increase understanding of this phenomenon, I explored the experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. Gaining insight into the experiences of school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs can provide valuable information about these students' counseling needs and experiences. By examining the perspectives of these counselors, we can gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by students in accelerated programs and develop more effective counseling strategies to support their academic and personal success.

Research Question

What are school counselors' experiences in providing services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs?

Theoretical Framework

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, I examined and analyzed the experiences of school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. I integrated the methods and strategies used by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), which led to a unique developmental model across a career lifespan. Skovholt and Ronnestad focused on the development and description of counselor expertness. Despite the lack of school counselors in the original study, Skovholt and Ronnestad's developmental model was an appropriate framework for this study because it is currently being used by counselor educators to conceptualize and train clinical and school counselors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). The six phases of Skovholt and Ronnestad's developmental model are lay helper, beginning student, advanced student, novice professional, advanced professional, and senior professional. I analyzed school counselors' narratives, feelings, and lived experiences to better understand their perspectives when they are called upon to work with students in accelerated academic programs. By using this career lifespan developmental model as the framework for this study, I was able to examine high school counselors' experiences in relation to their development of expertise in providing services to students in accelerated academic programs.

Nature of the Study

The approach that I used for this qualitative research was phenomenology, which focuses on the participants' experiences from a first-person perspective. According to Creswell (2014), phenomenological researchers attempt to offer insight into individuals'

lived experiences. Researchers who use a phenomenological approach gather data from in-depth, semistructured or unstructured interviews. The researcher tries to elicit an understanding of individuals' experiences and how others think about these experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019).

A phenomenological research design allows individuals to speak in their own voice, share their lived experiences with a certain phenomenon, and explore concepts from a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2022; Palinkas, 2014). I utilized a phenomenological approach to explore high school counselors' perspectives on providing services to students in accelerated academic programs (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Participating counselors had an opportunity to share their experiences, which I believed might include frustration at not being equipped in some instances to manage some of the issues presented by students as well as increased caseloads, which might prevent them from spending as much time with students as they would like. This approach enabled participants to share their individual experiences related to their personal identities and how they saw themselves and gauge whether further training is required to better assist counselors in meeting students' needs.

Definitions

In this section, I define the following words and phrases as they are used in this study:

Accelerated academic programs: Programs such as the International Baccalaureate, Cambridge, Pre-Governor's School, and gifted education, which allow students to take college-level courses to maximize their overall learning experiences.

Career lifespan developmental model: The developmental model of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), which focuses on the development and description of counselor expertise.

High-achieving students: Those students who do much better academically than their peers. High-achieving students tend to be those students who obtain high marks and good grades. They appear to be well organized and possess good time-management skills. They also tend to respond well to the classroom environment and engage enthusiastically in classroom discussions.

High school students' mental health problems: A term that refers to a variety of undiagnosed mental health problems, such as stress and anxiety, depression, substance and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, sleep deprivation, problems at home, and a lack of nutrition, that high school students face.

Phenomenology: A method of qualitative analysis that focuses on the study of individuals' experiences from a first-person perspective. Phenomenological researchers attempt to offer insight into individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

School counselors: The principal, assistant principal, school counselors, and teacher leaders who make up the educational leadership team of a school. Counselors support all students in the areas of academic achievement, career, and social/emotional growth to ensure that today's students become tomorrow's active, well-adjusted adults

through services such as individual counseling, small-group counseling, and classroom teaching.

Stress experienced by high school students: A term that refers to many high schools students' reports of feeling stressed or depressed due to being enrolled in too many advanced-level courses, which could impact their performance in accelerated classes and cause students to experience social and emotional issues.

Students' needs: Needs of students that school counselors address; these needs include mental health problems, depression, drug abuse, and suicidal ideation.

Assumptions

I assumed that all school counselors participating in the study would be honest in their self-assessment of their education and training. I also assumed that participants would freely summarize their experiences counseling high-achieving high school students. These assumptions were necessary to gather data from the participants. I will outline methods for preventing bias and promoting trustworthiness in my research in Chapter 3.

Scope and Delimitations

It is worth noting that the inclusion of licensed professional school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs in Grades 9–12 significantly narrows down the scope of the research study. However, the researcher's decision to focus on this specific population is understandable as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities that such students may face. Additionally, the fact that the participants were drawn from 12 out of 13 high schools

located within the school division is noteworthy as it provides a representative sample of the overall population. Overall, these delimitations are important to consider when interpreting the results of the study.

Limitations

A limitation of this qualitative research study is the time to gather data. The participants' individual biases may have influenced their perceptions of their experiences working with students in accelerated programs. Engaging with this particular population can foster biases that might impose constraints on the study. Transparency was paramount in this research endeavor. I openly shared my firsthand experiences in serving this student demographic and collaborating with counselors who also work with them. This transparency bolstered the study's credibility, I believe. I diligently strived to prevent my personal biases from swaying data collection during participant interactions in this study.

Significance

The professional literature contains very little about the experiences of high school students who are enrolled in accelerated academic programs or these students' counseling needs. By conducting this study, I sought to promote an increased understanding of the experiences of school counselors who work with high school students who are enrolled in accelerated academic programs. The study findings may address the current research gap about the experiences not only of counselors who serve high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs but also of the students themselves. By learning more about the experiences of school counselors who work with

high school students in accelerated academic programs, school counselors may be better prepared for this aspect of their responsibilities, and those currently engaged in the process can potentially receive in-service training that is helpful to them.

High school students in accelerated programs often experience unique problems but typically do not receive much attention from school counselors because they are the more academically advanced students. Society may benefit if academically successful students are assisted by counselors in managing many of the problems they have around perfectionism, avoidance, burnout, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. These students have the potential to contribute much to society but may need help when they are in high school. The results of this study may provide additional information that counseling educational stakeholders can use to better prepare high school counselors to provide high-quality services to students enrolled in accelerated academic programs.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the phenomenological study I completed. I interviewed high school counselors to analyze their lived experiences of providing services to students who were enrolled in accelerated academic programs. I summarized how I recruited participants, how I collected and analyzed data, and how I addressed ethical issues related to this study. In Chapter 2, I review key literature related to the study topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Even though high school students in advanced academic programs have had greater academic achievement than their peers, they are not immune to the mental health problems that other students face. The school counselor's position is critical in addressing the needs of all students and helping students who are having difficulty dealing with stress and psychological problems (ASCA, 2022). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study is to explore the experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs to increase understanding of that phenomenon.

Few researchers have investigated the relationship between adolescent interventions and outcomes. According to research, students participating in accelerated programs face unique obstacles as opposed to students enrolled in regular education classes (Suldo et al., 2018). There is a gap in the literature on school counselors' perspectives on delivering services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic learning programs.

In this chapter, I will briefly explain my search methods for this literature review. In addition, I will provide research on this study's conceptual framework, which is Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) lifespan developmental model. Then, I will provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the experiences of school counselors who provide services to students enrolled in accelerated academic programs.

Literature Search Strategy

I found the articles I cited in this study by searching databases typically used by counselors who conduct research, and I used the Walden University library to locate articles under the counseling category. Most of the literature included was published between 2008 and 2021. The following are some of the databases I used to gather information: Academic Search Complete, PsycArticles, PsycBooks, and PsycINFO. For the search for this study, key search words and phrases included accelerated academic programs, school counselors, student needs, high-achievement students, high school student tension, high school student mental health concerns, career lifespan growth model, and phenomenology.

Theoretical Foundation

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, I examine and analyze the experiences of school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. I integrate the methods and strategies used by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), which led to a unique developmental model across the career lifespan. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) focused on the development and description of counselor expertise. The participants in their study were community counselors or psychologists, while high school counselors were the participants in my research study. The developmental model of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) is currently being used by educators for practical purposes. Despite the lack of school counselors in the original study, Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) developmental model is an appropriate

framework for this study because it is currently being used by counselor educators to conceptualize and train clinical and school counselors.

The developmental model of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) comprises six phases: lay helper, beginning student, advanced student, novice professional, advanced professional, and senior professional. I will analyze school counselors' narratives, feelings, and lived experiences to better understand their perspectives when they are called upon to work with students in accelerated academic programs. Using Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) career lifespan developmental model as the framework that guides this study, I examine the experiences of high school counselors in relation to the counselors' development of expertise in providing services to students in accelerated academic programs.

Phase 1 in the model developed by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) is the lay helper. The lay helper stage is the time of pre-training. Usually, the lay helper recognizes the problem, offers support, and provides guidance based on their own experience (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The lay helper is guided by a personal understanding and common-sense principles of how to assist others in distress. When faced with a problem, the lay helper normally projects their own solutions. There are several boundary concerns at this point from the viewpoint of professionally oriented concepts of helping. Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) stated that a strong association with the individual being assisted and an unexamined quality of how best to help can lead to over-involvement, which can obstruct the reflective and investigative nature of an efficient aid process. Sympathy and empathy principles may distinguish the emotionality of the lay helper. In the principle of

clinical empathy, counselors' capacity to manage and monitor their emotional involvement is intrinsic. The helper puts the other person's shoes on but knows the shoes are not their own. Over-participation and involvement can fuel a tendency to offer precise and powerful advice (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

The beginning student phase, which can be the most difficult, is Phase 2. Theories, research, customers, professors, supervisors, one's own personal life, peers/colleagues, and the social/cultural setting combine to influence beginning students and often overwhelm them (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The beginning student recognizes that their conceptions and forms of helping are no longer acceptable or legitimate. Students should ask themselves during this process whether they have the personal characteristics required for this form of study, the resourcefulness needed to complete their studies, and the ability to cross the bridge between theory and practice (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). During this phase, professors and supervisors have a huge impact on students, and students are appreciative of the guidance and encouragement of experienced members of the profession. Meeting students for the first time is one of the most significant tasks encountered during this stage. The counselor's anxiety is calmed by positive input from their supervisor and clients, which the counselor will evoke.

The advanced student stage is the third phase. In this phase, the student's role is referred to as that of an intern (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). This phase's primary goal is to perform at a professional level. Many students aspire to excel in their work and want to avoid making mistakes during this stage. When comparing their own professional competence to that of beginning students, the advanced student recognizes that

professional training has had an impact while also recognizing that there is still much to learn. During this stage, the advanced student may feel vulnerable as a practitioner and seek confirmation and feedback from their supervisors or peers. At this stage, close supervision is essential. Observing supervisors and professional staff, hearing how staff conceptualize cases, and observing supervisors' professional behavior are all examples of modeling during the learning process. The advanced student may be frustrated by the lack of opportunities to observe supervisors at work during this phase.

Although individual paths may differ, the novice professional phase encompasses the first years following graduation (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). These years are hectic and interesting for many counselors or therapists, with many tasks to master and decisions to make. There is a sense of being on one's own at this stage. This is a period during which the counselor attempts to confirm the validity of their training through more careful examination of themselves and their work environment when confronted with insufficiently addressed professional obstacles. There is a feeling of liberation after graduation, enabling the counselor to assess the validity of what was learned in school. Yet, the inexperienced professional is usually unprepared for the level of work, issues of responsibility, and setting practical professional goals at this point. During this process, one's personality is reflected in one's work. The therapeutic partnership is given more weight in terms of client development, and more emphasis is put on recognizing and mastering relationship problems.

The experienced professional phase is Phase 5. The counselor/therapist has been practicing for several years and has worked with a variety of clients in a variety of work

environments at this point in their career (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The creation of a professional position that is highly congruent with the individual's self-perceptions is a central developmental challenge. The therapeutic relationship is crucial for the client's success during this stage. Techniques and procedures should be applied in a flexible and versatile manner rather than a static or conforming one. Counselors are more confident in their professional decisions during this phase, and they can form good working alliances with their clients. During this phase, counselors should question their clients if appropriate. However, there is also a deep awareness during this process that there are often no straightforward solutions to the problems faced. Counselors learn from their direct interactions with clients as well as their personal lives. There is a broadening of what affects the more seasoned professional during this period. The most effective way for an accomplished professional to learn is to draw on interpersonal interactions in both professional and personal life domains.

The sixth phase is the senior professional phase. The practitioner is a well-established professional who is regarded as a senior by others at this stage of professional growth. While some senior professionals reach this status in their mid-career, the typical senior professional has worked for 20 to 25 years or more and is nearing retirement (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Many seasoned professionals experience loss during this period—not only expected losses, but also current and past losses. At this point, counselors have a sense of self-acceptance, are pleased with their work, and are committed to continuing their professional development. Counselors are confident in their abilities, but they are realistic about what they will achieve.

Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) development model examines the phases of counselor development across the counselor's career. School counselors' professional development is influenced by education, professional training, and lived experiences (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Throughout their careers, counselors' mental state and professional development are addressed through the six phases of the developmental model. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) suggested the expertise and confidence levels that counselors reflect would be a function of their career longevity. The developmental model allows counselors to enhance their professional competence and feel more confident in their ability to work with students from various backgrounds and academic levels. However, an individual's six phases of development do not follow a linear pattern but instead follow cycles. Depending on the counselor's experience, they can revisit one of the developmental phases. When encountering issues requiring new counseling skills or knowledge, an experienced counselor can revisit the developmental themes of the novice counselor (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1992). To determine which stage each participant was in during their interview, I used the developmental model. The use of theories is a valuable tool in guiding and facilitating the therapeutic process.

Conceptual Framework

The approach that I used to guide my qualitative research is phenomenology, which focuses on the participants' experiences from a first-person perspective. According to Creswell (2014), phenomenology attempts to provide accounts that give insight into individuals' lived experiences. Researchers who use a phenomenological approach gather data from in-depth, semistructured or unstructured interviews. The researcher tries to get

an understanding of individuals' experiences and how we think about these experiences (Sackett et al., 2022).

A phenomenological research study allows individuals to speak in their own voices, share their lived experiences with a certain phenomenon, and explore concepts from a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2014; Palinkas, 2014). I utilized a phenomenological approach to explore high school counselors' experiences to obtain their perspective on providing services to students in accelerated academic programs (Creswell, 2022; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Counselors had an opportunity to share their experiences, which I believed might include frustration at not being equipped in some instances to deal with some of the issues presented by students as well as increased caseloads, which might prevent them from spending as much time with students as they would like. This approach enabled counselors to share their individual experiences to shed light on their personal identities and how they saw themselves and gauge whether further training is required to better assist counselors in meeting students' needs.

School Counselor 's Role

The ASCA developed the ASCA National Model, a comprehensive model that describes school counselor duties and functions and aids school counselors in fulfilling the needs of all students in their school communities (Robinson et al., 2019; Zyromski, 2019). The ASCA National Model is a framework designed to assist school counselors in developing and implementing a comprehensive data-driven school counseling program as an integral component of the school's academic mission (Lambie et al., 2019). The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2016) mandate that school

counselors “monitor their emotional and physical health and practice wellness to ensure optimal professional effectiveness” and “perform duties identified by the ASCA National Model (Standard B.3.c) to ensure optimal professional effectiveness” (Standard B.3.f). As a result, school counselors must strike a balance between assisting their students’ academic, social/emotional, and vocational development while also meeting their own wellness requirements (ASCA, 2016; Limberg et al., 2016).

The ASCA model focuses on four major school counseling components—foundation, administration, delivery, and accountability—with the goal of assisting school counselors in implementing a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019). The approach has academic, personal/social, and career development standards for all students through guidance on the curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support within this framework (ASCA, 2019). The ASCA model highlights the themes of leadership, advocacy, cooperation, and systemic change to highlight school counselors’ unique role in increasing all students’ achievement (ASCA, 2019).

School counselors’ role is to help students with their academic, career, and social/emotional development so that all students can succeed and learn, guided by standards, evidence, and statistics (ASCA, 2019). In response to educational and societal shifts, school counselors’ functions have expanded and broadened in recent years (ASCA, 2019); they are ultimately expected to collaborate with stakeholders to promote mental health and academic achievement, as well as act as advocates for all students (Walz, 2017). School counselors’ workloads have steadily increased over time, making it

difficult to spend equal time with each student (Edwin & Hussman, 2019). A student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 is recommended by the ASCA (ASCA, 2019). However, the national average for the number of students per school counselor is 459 (ASCA, 2019). A huge caseload could be construed as a potential source of burnout (ASCA, 2019). There is some evidence that large student-to-counselor ratios have a negative impact on school counselors' performance (Hilts & Liu, 2023). A demanding caseload was reported to be the most difficult component of a school counselor's job, leading to a common theme of frustration over not being able to meet all children's needs (Hilts & Liu, 2023).

Even though school counselors are vital mental health professionals in the school, they may not be able to provide all students with adequate mental health care and support (Christian & Brown, 2018). Lambie et al. (2019) concluded that, despite their qualifications, school counselors could not provide mental health counseling to students because of the nature of their work. When designing a school counseling program for accelerated students, it is vital to consider their distinct developmental needs and abilities. The continuous growth of brilliant and talented kids can be considerably aided by carefully structured educational experiences (Mammadov & Cross, 2018). Rather than formal training and familiarity with studies, school counselors' understanding and perspectives on acceleration are based on informal information and limited awareness (Carlos & Holcomb-McCoy, 2017). School counselors in many instances are underprepared to assist parents, instructors, and kids in making informed decisions about acceleration.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Even with increasing evidence that perfectionism is correlated with psychological distress among adolescents, few studies have explored this relationship with interventions developed for use in academically high-achieving adolescent populations. Gyori et al. (2023) conducted a study to explore the relationship between perfectionism dimensions and nonsuicidal self-injury functions to examine the potential mediating effect of mental disorders on adolescents aged 13–18. The results confirmed that adolescents who report a high rate of maladaptive perfectionism concerns are more likely to engage in nonsuicidal self-injury. Adolescents with perfectionistic concerns are at a heightened risk of anxiety disorders (Gyori et al., 2023).

Suldo et al. (2018a) conducted a study that focused on students in Advanced Placement (AP) classes and International Baccalaureate programs who experienced higher levels of stress compared to students in general education classes, which could lead to elevated levels of stress for students' academic and mental health problems. The study consisted of 2,379 students in AP and IB classes and identified factors associated with variability observed in multiple dimensions of success. The study's findings show a correlation between having stronger personal characteristics and a supportive environment with better outcomes for students enrolled in AP and International Baccalaureate programs. These positive outcomes appear to counterbalance the challenges and stressors that are inherent in the demanding academic environments of AP and IB programs (Suldo et al., 2018a).

Suldo et al. (2018b) conducted a cross-sectional research study to determine whether students enrolled in IB and AP courses would benefit from extra support. This population has unique risk factors needing specialized services, such as elevated perceived stress levels. Suldo et al. examined 1,150 students in AP classes from more than 10 schools and 1,200 students from 10 IB schools. Approximately 2,379 students in the ninth through 12th grades were interviewed, and their school records were collected. The researchers found that students in accelerated programs need support despite their history of academic success.

Shaunessy-Dedrick et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative research study in which 15 effective and 15 failing high school students were studied related to their perceived stressors, coping mechanisms, and intrapersonal and environmental factors viewed by students as affecting their college-level performance. The authors learned that the primary sources of stress for effective students included meeting multiple academic demands and searching for a balance between academic goals, social needs, and extracurricular activities. The coping responses most identified and used were successful time and task management, finding temporary diversions, and cognitive reassessment. Students viewed a good work ethic and high achievement motivation as personal characteristics associated with success, and encouragement from a large network of peers, parents, and teachers as contextual variables that are linked to optimal performance in rigorous accelerated high school programs.

In reviewing the literature, research indicates that gifted students or students in accelerated programs experience high stress levels. Furthermore, perfectionism has been

reported to be a factor that impacts anxiety among high-achieving students. In conclusion, with the proper knowledge and skills, school counselors have the potential to nurture and care for developing gifted and accelerated students.

Summary and Conclusions

I found 18 peer-reviewed articles when I used the search term “accelerated academic programs.” Although many of the articles were similar to those found in the search under the counseling topic, all the articles were for graduate students in universities, not students at the high school level. In the same journals, under the category of counseling within the last 10 years, 910 peer-reviewed papers appeared when the words “school counselors,” “student needs,” and “high-achievement students” were entered. There was one article that discussed school counselors’ role in meeting students’ mental health needs and explored professional identity problems (Byrne et al., 2020). As the field of school counseling continues to change, Byrne et al. (2020) proposed that school counselors’ professional identity should move with it, concentrating on their roles as both educational leaders and mental health professionals. Many of the peer-reviewed articles reviewed centered on the mental health of adult learners and not adolescents or the services that high school counselors provide.

According to Suldo et al. (2018a), school counselors play a key role in addressing the needs of gifted kids in school buildings. Yet, school counselors may not know how to best assist this special demographic because there are no systematic, standardized, and empirically tested best practices for counseling talented adolescents. This study’s objective was to explore school counselors’ experiences with gifted and talented students

and the most referenced methods, strategies, and approaches in the gifted educational literature to see if any of these best practices were used. School counselor educational programs should think about including a training curriculum that addresses issues unique to gifted students' learning and development (Suldo et al., 2018).

In the next chapter, I will summarize the methodological approach for this research study. I will suggest a qualitative phenomenological research study to fill in the information and research gaps about counselors' experiences delivering services to high school students in accelerated academic programs. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research design and rationale, the researcher's role, the methodology, and the instrumentation. I will also go into participant recruitment, data collection, and my data analysis strategy in greater depth.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study, I explored the experiences of high school counselors working with students in accelerated programs. For the purpose of understanding counselor expertise across a career lifespan, I employed Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) developmental model, which was originally created for community counselors. Although the model was initially intended for a different purpose, I found it appropriate for this study based on its current usage by counselor educators. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) outlined six phases: the lay helper, beginning student, advanced student, novice professional, advanced professional, and senior professional. I sought to analyze counselors' narratives, emotions, and lived experiences to comprehend their perspectives when supporting students in accelerated programs.

Research on school counselors in this context is limited, underscoring the significance of this study. By utilizing Skovholt and Ronnestad's (1992) model as a guiding framework, I was able to delve into high school counselors' development of expertise in catering to students in accelerated academic programs. I wanted to fill a gap in understanding and provide valuable insight into the challenges and successes encountered by counselors in this specialized role. The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs to obtain a better understanding of the experiences and counseling needs of these students. In this chapter, I will explain the research design I used in this study, my role in the investigation, the methodology for the study, and issues

of trustworthiness. Discussion of methodology includes the participant selection process, the setting for data collection, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

I sought to answer the following research question: What are school counselors' experiences in providing services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs? I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study, utilizing the methods and strategies introduced by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) to examine the development and description of counselor expertise.

Role of the Researcher

I am a certified professional school counselor in suburban Northern Virginia. I am an African American woman who has 25 years of high school counseling experience. I have spent 22 of those years as a school counseling director. An essential role of the researcher is to observe, collect, and analyze the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). My role in this study as a qualitative researcher was to ask questions, listen, consider, and then ask more questions to obtain deeper levels of conversation with the hope of using a broad range of ideas, hypotheses, and tools to build a picture (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The researcher is the main data collection and analysis instrument who collects, codes, and analyzes data to reveal the evolving concepts. The researcher's role in qualitative research is to access the student participants' thoughts and feelings to provide context and understanding (Sutton, 2015). Interviewing participants may be a difficult undertaking because it entails asking people to talk about personal matters (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The researcher must identify relevant aspects of their own personality, including any biases and preconceptions, expectations, and experiences that determine their capacity to perform the research (Greenback, 2003). Hays and Singh (2012) stressed the importance of researchers recognizing their prejudices, beliefs, and opinions that may interfere with the research process. This awareness forms part of the confidence or trustworthiness that is crucial in qualitative research projects.

Neutrality is essential but does not mean the researcher has no links to the topic. Accordingly, when developing interview questions, I needed to be aware of my personal biases (Creswell, 2022). My biases included that counselors who counsel students who are enrolled in accelerated academic programs often experience frustration at not being equipped in some instances to deal with some of the issues presented by students. I also believe school counselors are experiencing increased caseloads, which may prevent them from spending as much time with students as they would like. To ensure that my questions and interpretations of the results were unbiased, I used a checks-and-balances system with committee members and a peer reviewer. My goal is to view the findings objectively and nonjudgmentally.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

High school counselors who had experience working with students in accelerated academic programs were this study's participants. The study population consisted of purposefully and convenience-selected high school counselors in an urban school district in Virginia, none of whom were my previous colleagues. Purposeful and convenience

selection was used to gather participants who met the study's inclusion criteria.

Purposeful sampling is used when researchers wish to target certain individuals with characteristics of interest (Creswell, 2022). The researcher uses their expertise and judgment to select a sample that they think is the best fit. Convenience sampling allows the researcher to select individuals who are easily accessible to them (Creswell, 2022).

Participants in the current study included counselors within the school district who had at least 2 years of experience and provided services to high school students who were enrolled in accelerated academic programs. A total of eight interviews were conducted. Participants volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were required to complete a consent form and show a desire to take part in the research study.

It is important for the researcher to safeguard the participants and the data the researcher collects. This study's participants were selected using purposeful and convenience sampling and had no professional connection to me. To avoid the possibility of potential bias and conflict of interest, this study's participants were recruited from high schools in an urban school district in which I work that are not the high school in which I serve as a school counselor administrator. I am not the supervisor of the counselors in the other schools who participated in my study. I sent information about my research study to each of the other high school's directors to share with their counseling staff (see Appendix A). I presented detailed information to prospective participants and obtained their informed consent to engage in the study. Participants included counselors within the school district who had at least 2 years of experience and who provided services to high school students who were enrolled in accelerated academic programs. When there is

enough data to duplicate the study, the ability to gather new data has been exhausted, and additional coding is no longer possible, saturation has been reached (Creswell, 2022; Fusch & Ness, 2015). In the current study, participants were interviewed until saturation was reached after a total of eight interviews.

Instrumentation

The data collection included procedures that were sensitive to cultural, legal, and ethical issues. Appendix B includes detailed questions I used during the 1-hr interviews with participants and the procedures I used for the interviews. Follow-up interviews and member checks were conducted after the first round of interviews to address any gaps in information. The committee chair reviewed and evaluated the interview questions to establish content validity and provide feedback on their appropriateness and effectiveness (Roberts, 2020).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I reached out to the district's department of program evaluation to ask what was needed in order to conduct research. All research requests must be submitted for review by district leadership. The review time may vary depending on the project's complexity and the number of participants involved. Once the research application was completed, it was emailed to the department of program evaluation requesting permission to conduct the research study. Complete applications are reviewed on a rolling basis. The proposal met the standards required for research by the school district. Permission was granted to contact counselors to participate in the study. An email was sent to a total of 123 high school counselors to determine their interest in the study and if they met its criteria. A

total of eight counselors reached out to me via email expressing their desire to participate in the research study. Once interest was determined, the study's criteria were reviewed. Participants were selected from a pool of counselors who completed a consent form and expressed a desire to participate in the research study (Creswell, 2022). Participants were provided with a copy of the consent form, which addressed their rights and the importance of privacy.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom to gather the participants' narratives of their experiences. The length of each interview was approximately 60 min. The method was collaborative and casual using open-ended questions and feedback. Participant interviews were semistructured in such a manner that all of this study's topics were covered with all the participants. To maintain confidentiality and increase openness during the interview, participants' names and schools weren't used. Additionally, the terms of confidentiality, format, and the interview process were addressed with participants. Participants were asked if they had anything to add to the topic that they had not gotten to discuss. This allowed participants an opportunity to be heard and provided closure to the interview process. Follow-up interviews occurred to address gaps in data like misunderstandings and missing or unclear information. This occurred after member checks. The recordings were transcribed by Vanan Services, a transcription service. Once the Zoom recording was transcribed, a copy of the transcript was shared with participants via email to review for accuracy.

Data Analysis Plan

Reflective journaling was used to identify initial codes. After coding each interview, I documented my reaction to the participants' stories. Coding is a process in which meaning is assigned to the data collected. Codes assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are attached to chunks of varying-sized data and can be a straightforward descriptive label or a more evocative and complex one (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Saldaña (2021) stated that "a code is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based visual data" (p. 3). The four steps of coding success are to immerse, prepare, choose the research approach, and code. Immersion involves reading and rereading all the participant transcripts. Preparation consists of the researcher identifying what they expect to find and identifying biases. Choosing the approach consists of determining what coding strategy the researcher will use. Meanwhile, coding involves highlighting words and phrases and taking notes.

A reflective journal was used throughout the analysis to document reactions between the themes and the phenomena identified. The journal, combined with the transcripts, assisted in a more detailed and critical examination of the ideas that emerged related to the research question as the research progressed. I read all interview notes and transcribed the data collected. Specific phrases and statements from the transcripts pertaining to the phenomena being studied were extracted. The meanings of the participants' significant statements were organized into themes based on their common

meanings. I analyzed the data, reviewed the transcripts, and identified the themes generated. Data were analyzed with the assistance of a peer reviewer to ensure objectivity. As themes evolved into clusters and categories, a color-coded system was used to highlight common themes and categories (Gill et al., 2008; Sutton & Austin, 2015). A peer reviewer analyzed participant responses to enhance the study's credibility (Creswell, 2022).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The degree of trust in the data, interpretation, and techniques employed to ensure the study's quality is referred to as the study's trustworthiness or rigor (Pilot & Beck, 2014). Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the findings represent the participants' personal or lived experiences of the phenomena under investigation. Researchers set the protocol and procedures required for their studies to be worthwhile for readers. Several considerations should be considered when determining whether the qualitative research methodology, findings, and interpretations have been developed in a trustworthy way. These considerations are evidence of thick description, prolonged engagement, triangulation strategies, member checks, researcher collaboration, transferability, and reflexivity (Connelly, 2016).

Techniques used to achieve trustworthiness for this study include the disclosure of personal bias, the use of a peer reviewer, the solicitation of participant feedback, and the use of thick description (Young et al., 2023). Thick descriptions and participant quotes were used to prevent bias in the study (Young et al., 2023). Thick description refers to participants thoroughly explaining their views, meanings, and understandings. When the

trustworthiness of a qualitative study has been determined, counselors are in a stronger position to evaluate how the results of the research will affect their practice.

To reduce researcher bias, it is important to disclose any personal or professional information related to the study. I have worked as a school counseling administrator for 25 years. I believe this study is needed based on my experience in this setting. Some of the findings reflect what I expected, while new information has also surfaced. Accurate, valid, and new information about this topic was ascertained through reflection and peer review. Moreover, thick description and participant quotes were used to prevent bias in the study.

To ensure the accuracy of the data, I consulted with a peer reviewer. Electronic copies of participant transcripts and the word count were provided to the peer reviewer for review. I met several times with the peer reviewer via Zoom to review the data and address any questions that had arisen. Member checks were also used during the research study. Participants were asked to respond after receiving an electronic copy of their interview transcript to verify its accuracy. After reviewing their transcript, participants were provided an opportunity to add additional information. Everyone who participated in the study said their summaries were correct and no additional information needed to be added. Moreover, after listening to each interview, I read over the transcripts for each participant several times to ensure accuracy. The information was accessible electronically in case further review was required.

Triangulation means the implementation of various methods of data sources in qualitative research to develop a thorough understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1990).

Triangulation has also been used as a qualitative research source to test validity through the convergence of information from various sources (Bhandari, 2023). The four types of triangulations are method triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and data source triangulation (Cope, 2014). The triangulation of methods involves the use of multiple data collection methods relating to the same phenomenon, which includes interviews, observations, and field notes. The triangulation of investigators requires the involvement of two or more participants in the same sample to provide several findings and conclusions. The triangulation of theory makes use of various theories to examine and interpret data. With this method of triangulation, various theories may help the researcher to accept or refute the hypotheses. The triangulation of data sources includes the compilation of data from different types of users to obtain various viewpoints and data confirmation, including people, organizations, families, and societies. Prolonged commitment concerns the period of data collection. Member checks are a method in which data and their interpretation are taken back to the participants to confirm the findings are logical. Peer reviews happen when the researcher asks peers to comment on new concepts, subjects, and hypotheses (Merriam, 1998).

Ethical Procedures

Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study (no. 10-25-22-0290391). Data gathering took place once an IRB application was approved. Identifying information about individual participants was not used in the study to protect the participants; instead, all direct quotes were assigned a participant number. I am the only one with identifying information.

I have an ethical obligation to protect research participants. I must respect their rights, values, and needs. I advised research participants verbally and in writing that the study was strictly voluntary and that they could stop at any time they chose (Creswell, 2022). I replaced participants' identifying information with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality (Creswell, 2022). I stored the master list of participants separately from the data I collected and will destroy the list after 5 years. I stored research data in a secure file cabinet and electronic data on a password-protected device.

I recruited participants from high schools in the school division other than my own high school to avoid the possibility of bias and conflict of interest, since I am a school counselor administrator in one of the high schools in the division in which I am employed. I developed appropriate procedures and protocols to refer any counselors who experienced distress because of participating to the employee assistance program in my school district. I was aware of my own personal views so that I could interpret the experiences and behavior of others and represent them in the data that I collected (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This approach enabled counselors to share their individual experiences to shed light on their personal identities and how they saw themselves and gauge whether further training is required to better assist counselors in meeting students' needs.

Summary

I began this chapter with an overview of the research and the reasoning as to why a qualitative phenomenological study was the most fitting methodology for this design. I also discussed my role as the researcher, recruitment of participants and collection of data, data analysis plan, and strategies for addressing ethical issues related to this study.

Participants for this study were gathered using purposeful and convenience sampling.

Purposeful sampling is based on the premise that selecting the best cases for the study results in the best research, and that the cases sampled directly affect the research findings (Palinkas et al., 2015). Convenience sampling is when the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied (Creswell, 2022).

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. One central research question was used to understand these experiences better: What are school counselors' experiences in providing services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs? In this chapter, I will discuss the setting, demographics, and method of collecting and analyzing the data, as well as the common themes revealed in the data analysis. Issues related to trustworthiness and discrepancies in data will be discussed in this chapter. Additionally, a summary of the study and an introduction to Chapter 5 will be provided.

Setting

All eight interviews for this study were conducted using the Zoom platform. A significant advantage of data management and security was the capability to securely capture Zoom interviews. All eight participants agreed to use Zoom for the interviews. There was no cost for any participants to access Zoom. A Zoom link was sent to each participant via email before the interview for them to review. I was in a private environmental setting, as were each of the interviewees during each meeting. Each interview was conducted when school was not in session to avoid interfering with the participants' job duties and responsibilities. Interruptions were kept to a minimum. The public address system disrupted two interviews, and another was interrupted by students who had questions. The interviews resumed after the disruptions. All of the interviews

were conducted in their entirety in one sitting. None of the interviews were disrupted for technical reasons.

Demographics

A total of eight participants participated in the study. The participants were recruited from high schools in the school district in which I work other than the high school in which I serve as a school counseling administrator. Participants were licensed, certified professional school counselors who worked in a public high school setting in a suburban area. Each of the eight participants self-reported being a professional school counselor with a degree in school counseling. Participants must have at least 2 years of experience and provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. Participants' experience ranged from 3 to 32 years providing counseling services to students in accelerated programs. Seven participants graduated from the CACREP.

Based on the developmental model, three counselors had 12–18 years of experience. During this phase, the counselor has been practicing for several years and has worked with various students in various work experiences at this point in their career. Counselors are more confident in their professional decisions during this stage. During this stage, the experienced counselor has passed through two phases of learning and now begins to integrate knowledge from both when working with students. Counselors learn from their direct interactions with students and their personal lives. Counselors during this phase learn to draw from their interpersonal interactions in the professional and personal life domains.

The typical senior professional has worked for 20–25 years or more. Two counselors had 22–32 years of experience. Their development looks much like the experienced school counselor phase, as they are nearing retirement. During this stage, counselors have a sense of self-acceptance, are pleased with their work, and are committed to continuing their professional development and growth. The counselors were confident in their abilities and skills but realistic about needing additional training to stay relevant and better help students. The two counselors at this stage expressed no desire to retire. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' demographics.

Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their identity and confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Year obtained master's degree	Years of experience as a high school counselor	Involvement in a CACREP program	Gender identity
P01	2005	17	Yes	Female
P02	2004	18	Yes	Male
P03	2000	23	Yes	Female
P04	2010	12	Yes	Female
P05	2019	3	Yes	Male
P06	1993	32	Yes	Female
P07	2000	22	No	Male
P08	2019	3	Yes	Female

Note. CACREP = Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs.

Data Collection

All participants were from the same school district. An application was submitted to the superintendent's staff asking for permission to conduct the research study. The

proposal met the standards required for research, and permission was granted to contact counselors to participate in the study. The school district employed 123 high school counselors. All high school counselors were sent an invitational email to respond indicating their willingness to participate in the research study. The email communication specified that potential research study participants needed to have at least 2 years of experience working in a high school setting with students in accelerated programs (see Appendix A). Interested counselors were asked to reply to the invitational email if they were willing to be interviewed or had any questions about the study.

A total of eight school counselors responded to the invitational email and expressed an interest in participating in the research study. After participants had agreed to participate, a consent form was emailed to each participant. After consent forms were received and reviewed, each participant was contacted to determine the interview date and time of their interview. All interviews were scheduled within 2 weeks of receiving a signed consent form. Interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview was scheduled at the participant's and my convenience. Interviews were conducted during fall of the year.

Utilizing Zoom, all eight participants took part in one-on-one, semistructured interviews. To ensure that I accurately captured the participants' experiences, I recorded each interview on my personal computer in a password-protected file. Each participant was interviewed using the interview protocol (see Appendix B). The data collection process took place over a period of 6 weeks from December 2022 until February 2023. The length of each interview was between 30 and 60 min. All interviews' Zoom

recordings and transcriptions were downloaded on a personal computer, stored in a password-protected file, and kept confidential. After recording each Zoom interview, a copy of the recorded interview was saved to my computer and sent to Vanan Services, a transcription service, for transcription. Follow-up questions were asked to obtain additional information when needed.

Because the interviews were being recorded, I was able to give participants my full attention when they shared their experiences working with students in accelerated academic programs. Participant P01 shared that a sign was placed on the office door indicating “recording in progress; please do not disturb.” Three students knocked on the door during the interview, asking if the counselor had a moment to answer some questions they had. I am the only individual who can review the data with access to the password and login information. The IRB, committee chair, and committee members have access to raw data upon request. Saturation was achieved at the eighth interview, as no new information was added.

After recording each Zoom interview, I used member checks to clarify and ensure that I had captured each participant’s essence and to ensure content validity. I adhered to the IRB-approved data collection process. Techniques used to gather pertinent information included asking open-ended questions, summarizing, paraphrasing, note-taking, and reflecting on content during the interview. I met via telephone with participants 2 weeks after the initial interview for 30 min to see if anything needed to be added or changed or address any questions participants might have. Brief follow-up

interviews were needed to gather additional information about participants' demographic information.

The district representative forwarded an approval letter to me to share with high school counselors; participants replied to the interview invitation by email; participants were selected from a pool of counselors who expressed an interest in participating in the study; I sent a consent form via email to all interested counselors to complete; interviews were conducted to gather the participants' narratives of their experiences. The interviews were one-on-one interviews that took place via Zoom with no other participants present; interviews were recorded through Zoom for no more than 60 min; participant interviews were structured in a manner so that I covered all of the study's topics with each participant.

Interviews were transcribed over a 4-week time frame by a professional transcription service. A copy of the transcription was emailed to the participants to ensure accuracy. Each participant responded via email that the information had been transcribed accurately. The interview data have been retained and stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office that only I can access. The electronic files along with emails were saved on my personal computer and identified by an identification number. The data will remain saved for 5 years.

Prior to their interview, I asked each participant to print a copy of the consent form, sign the document, scan the document, and send the completed copy back to me. The interviews began with a welcome, a review of the signed consent form, and completion of the demographic questions. I followed the interview protocol, which I

developed based on the main research question of this study: What are school counselors' experiences in working with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs? The interview questions were as follows:

1. Tell me about your experiences working with students enrolled in accelerated programs.
2. How has counseling students enrolled in accelerated programs been different from counseling students who are not enrolled in accelerated programs?
3. How are the needs of students who are enrolled in accelerated programs different?
4. Have you had any students who have struggled with anxiety?
5. Have you had students who have experienced substance abuse?
6. Have you had students who have experienced depression?
7. Have you had students who have experienced suicidal ideation?
8. Have you had students who have experienced homelessness?
9. Have you had students who have expressed bullying?
10. Have you had students who have experienced physical health issues?
11. Have you had students who have experienced pressure from parents to be successful?
12. Tell me what is most challenging about counseling students in accelerated programs.
13. Tell me what is most rewarding about counseling students in accelerated programs.

Data Analysis

Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I conducted in-depth interviews, which I audio recorded I analyzed the interview responses, which were transcribed, as well as data from reflective journaling and detailed thematic analysis that I undertook. The most common interview responses were categorized, and the data were hand coded. Reflective journaling was used to note emerging patterns within and between interviews to build on emerging themes (Patterson & Williams, 2022). Steps utilized in the data analysis process included using a transcription service to transcribe participant interviews. The application WordCounter was used to find the most frequently occurring words and phrases within the text. Interviews were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The themes from responses were noted and analyzed. I needed to interpret the school counselors' experiences accurately. The themes with the highest frequency were labeled as the main themes.

Transcription

The interviews were transcribed using a transcription service after the data collection process had been completed. After the first interview, I reached out to the participants via telephone to ensure they did not have any objections to or concerns about their interview being transcribed by a transcription service. I shared the reason why a transcription service was being utilized, due to the amount of time that it took to transcribe one interview. I asked each participant if they had any objections to or questions about their interview being transcribed by a transcription service. Participants were informed that their Zoom interview containing a pseudonym would be shared with

the transcription service. Their names would not be shared for confidentiality and privacy reasons. Each participant's interview and transcription were assigned a pseudonym. The audio recordings of the conversations have been kept on my personal computer in a password-protected file and will be retained for 5 years. To guarantee accuracy, each transcription was checked, and the audio was compared at least twice. Additionally, participants received a copy of the transcription to check for accuracy.

Member Checks

Once transcriptions were complete, member checks were utilized to obtain feedback, improve accuracy and credibility, and check the study's authenticity. I checked each participant's interview transcripts, and the audio was compared at least twice for accuracy. Participants were sent an email and asked to respond after receiving a copy of the transcription of their interview to verify its accuracy. Participants indicated that their transcriptions were correct. A copy of the final findings will be shared with participants for their review.

Coding

In addition to the primary researcher, a peer reviewer was used to assist in coding common themes. The peer reviewer was an impartial colleague who reviewed and assessed participant transcripts, methodology, and findings. The peer reviewer had a doctorate in curriculum instruction with an emphasis on special education supervision and leadership. She was selected because of her work with students in gifted education. The peer reviewer and I met on several occasions, reviewed each transcript, and identified common themes. Index cards were used to write themes. The WordCounter

application was also used to analyze the text for this research project to find the most frequent words and phrases. Each participant's interview and transcript were assigned a number. Four themes emerged from the interviews:

- intensity (i.e., feeling unprepared to work with students enrolled in accelerated programs; Theme 1),
- parallel process (i.e., experiencing some of the same issues as the students; Theme 2),
- feelings of being undervalued (i.e., not receiving recognition for what they did or respect for their time or skills; Theme 3); and
- internalized sense of satisfaction (i.e., feeling a greater sense of pride when students were successful; Theme 4).

Discrepant Cases

By examining discrepant information, I could ascertain whether there was unexpected evidence or insufficient information during the initial interviews. I may choose to either delve deeper into the matter or disregard it as irrelevant to addressing the research inquiries posed in the study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a research study is determined by four concepts: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2022). Each of these concepts contributes to a research study's trustworthiness. Various methods were used to maintain trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was verified by examining the outcomes' credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Participants were

allowed to review interview data, which enhanced the data's accuracy. After hearing the interviews, I read over the transcripts for each participant. The information was accessible electronically in case further review was required. A peer reviewer, soliciting participant feedback, member checking, and thick descriptions of what participants said in interviews were used.

Credibility

Credibility measures the truth value of qualitative research or whether the study's findings are correct and accurate. It relies on the credibility of the researchers themselves, as well as their research methods (Creswell, 2022). To achieve credibility in this study, I took notes during the review of the consent form or the interview if participants had any concerns or questions. Notes taken during participant interviews included key points, quotes, observations, and reflections made by me. These notes capture the essence of the conversation, including participants' responses, emotions, body language, and any other relevant information that may contribute to the understanding of the research topic (Creswell, 2022). Additionally, researchers may document their own thoughts, impressions, and interpretations during the interview process. The goal is to record rich, detailed data that can be later analyzed to uncover themes, patterns, and insights relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2022). For example, one participant inquired about the study's confidentiality. I made a note to follow up with the participants to allow them to review the final research study so they could see there were no identifying factors. As specific themes developed during the interview, I would note them. A transcription service was used to transcribe interviews. As soon as the interview transcripts were

received, I read them several times and listened to the recorded interviews to ensure accuracy and engage in immersion. Participants were provided an opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. Each participant received an electronic copy of their transcript. Participants replied that the information was correct. The data evolved into several themes to produce the experiences of high school counselors working with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs.

It was possible to build credibility as a researcher by using detailed, rich descriptions. Being open and honest was crucial and improved the study's credibility among the participants. Because of my experience in school counseling, I made every attempt to ensure that my biases did not affect how the data for this study were gathered and how the participant data were analyzed. I maintained objectivity and did not influence the study during the data collection and analysis process.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to transfer research findings from one context to another (Leavy, 2017). Understanding the lived experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs was the primary objective of this qualitative phenomenological study. Participants were from one school district and were all high school counselors. Using rich, thick descriptive data in a study is a great strategy for achieving transferability. It allows readers to immerse themselves in the details of the research findings and compare them to their own experiences. This approach enhances the likelihood that readers can identify

resemblances between the study's findings and their own situations, thereby increasing the study's relevance and applicability.

Dependability

The dependability of the qualitative data is demonstrated through assurances that the findings were established despite any changes within the research setting or participants during data collection (Creswell, 2022). Dependability can be achieved by having a peer reviewer participate in the analysis process, providing a detailed description of the research method, and conducting a step-by-step repetition of the study to identify similarities in results or to enhance findings so another researcher can replicate the study. The peer reviewer also reviewed interview transcriptions for accuracy and provided feedback to enhance credibility and ensure validity.

Other researchers will be able to duplicate this study because it was dependable throughout. Each step I took to complete this study is detailed for dependability's sake. For instance, the interview protocol describes each phase of the data-gathering procedure (see Appendix B). A detailed log was maintained throughout the study. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. Each participant was interviewed once. Eight participants accepted and were interviewed. The length of each interview was between 30 and 60 min, for a combined total of 255 min. All interviews were recorded via Zoom with the participants' names kept confidential. The data collection process lasted approximately 8 weeks. This window of time provided enough time for each interview, an opportunity to clarify any responses, the chance to check the transcript, and the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings. To guarantee accuracy, I read each

transcript and compared it to the audio recording at least twice and then read through it several times. To guarantee that the data gathered addressed the study questions, the interviews adhered to the interviewing protocol.

Confirmability

Confirmability of qualitative data is achieved when the data are checked and rechecked throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure results are likely repeatable by others (Creswell, 2022). Throughout the research study, confirmability was maintained. The voices of participants were reflected in the research study. The role of the researcher was to gather as much detail as possible from participants objectively and to ask questions for clarification when needed. Their responses informed the themes that emerged during data analysis. Any preconceptions or biases were discussed with participants and removed to focus on the participants' lived experiences. For further review, the data were also accessible electronically. Member checks, peer reviewer, self-disclosure, discrepant information disclosure, and rich, detailed accounts of what participants stated in their interviews were all used (Lowell et al., 2017). To maintain the participants' voices in the presentation of results, rich and thick transcript excerpts were included to support each theme.

Results

The hermeneutic phenomenological design supports gaining a deeper understanding of school counselors' lived experiences. Information about how immersion is presented, the development of thematic meaning, and understanding the synthesis of codes was acquired through this hermeneutic design's data collection and analysis

process. A general narrative, general structure, and phenomenological reflection will be provided in this section.

Thematic Meaning Units

The research question—What are school counselors' experiences in providing services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs?

The four themes that emerged from the interviews were as follows:

- intensity (i.e., feeling unprepared to work with students enrolled in accelerated programs; Theme 1),
- parallel process (i.e., experiencing some of the same issues as the students; Theme 2),
- feelings of being undervalued (i.e., not receiving recognition for what they did or respect for their time or skills; Theme 3); and
- internalized sense of satisfaction (i.e., feeling a greater sense of pride when students were successful; Theme 4).

In the first theme, intensity, seven participants indicated they felt unprepared to work with students in accelerated programs. In Theme 2, parallel process, six participants shared that they experienced many of the same issues as the students they served, such as job demands, fears, and frustrations. The third theme was that counselors felt undervalued; all eight participants indicated they felt undervalued, overworked, and unappreciated. The last theme, internalized sense of satisfaction, was that all eight participants shared that they felt a sense of pride when students were successful.

Theme 1: Intensity: Counselors Feel Unprepared to Work With Students Enrolled in Accelerated Programs.

According to all participants, they all assumed that this population would be easier to work with; however, they were surprised by these students' demanding nature and high expectations. All participants shared that they entered the counseling field because they felt they could make a difference in students' lives. A total of six participants reported that they had not received adequate training to deal with this population during their degree programs. All their preparation was in counseling skills and theories. Six participants, even those with several years of experience, did not recall discussing the particular population in their program studies.

Participant P08 shared, "Counselors need a specific skillset or additional training to meet the unique needs of this population." Participant P01 shared, "These students are more self-motivated, know what they want, push for it, take all the rigorous courses without being prompted, and are proactive. They come to the counselor to ask you what they can do to get into the most challenging courses or how to get into a university of their choice." Participant P07 shared, "At times, I feel like we have an assembly line meeting with one student after another. We need more time to meet with this population to address their unique needs." Participant P03 shared,

These students tend to be more goal-oriented and already have a focus for what they're pursuing, sort of what their goals are post-high school. And my role has mainly been to support them with what they needed. A lot of that depended on what kind of support they had at home and their parents' experiences with, you

know, education after high school. So those students tended to have more family support and didn't need as much help from the counselor other than the things that I was required to do as part of, like as seniors and helping them apply to college.

Counselor Caseloads

The ASCA (2019) recommended a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1. Seven participants reported that they were unprepared for large caseloads, which exceeded ASCA's recommendations. Participant P02 shared,

Because of large counselor caseloads, it is difficult for counselors to address the needs of students in accelerated programs, especially if they have lots of questions or need assistance with completing their college applications. Time is also an issue when dealing with this population because counselors don't want to make mistakes.

As a result of high student-to-counselor ratios, counselors have less time available for providing direct counseling services to students. This is more the case with students in accelerated programs, who have greater demands or constraints on their time.

Participants shared that they had not received training on managing large caseloads effectively in their programs. According to Smith (2011), school counselors' workloads have steadily increased over time, making it difficult for counselors to spend equal time with each student. Participants shared that they needed more time to meet with this population to address their unique needs as they had greater time demands, which made the large populations even more stressful for counselors. Participant P02 shared,

Many gifted students typically apply to 12 to 14 colleges and universities. One student even listed the University of Virginia as their backup school. UVA is not a backup school. I usually reserve 45–60 min when I know I will meet with students in this population because they tend to have more questions.

According to participants, they did not recall receiving any training in their programs on dealing with mental health issues when working with this population. Students in accelerated programs grasp information at a faster rate than other students. There is a need for intensity, depth, and intellectual challenge in their lives. Students in accelerated programs tend to assess situations, then decide how to act and whether to hide or display their true feelings. Although accelerated students are no more susceptible to mental illness than anyone else, they tend to overthink, worry, or be cautiously alert. Students in accelerated programs maintain high expectations for themselves. Parents or teachers may have high expectations of these students; however, more often than not, it results from their awareness of their strengths. Although academics may come quickly for these students, many expect to excel and feel shame and anxiety if they receive low grades. Some may give up entirely after experiencing a failure and experience anxiety and depression. Participant P06 shared, “I am a veteran counselor, so I have adjusted to working with some of the mental health issues that students bring to school with them. More training would be beneficial to deal with the issues that students are dealing with, especially gifted students.”

Theme 2: Parallel Process

In this study, a phenomenon known as parallel process emerged, wherein counselors found themselves grappling with issues mirroring those experienced by their students, including job demands, fears, burnout, and frustration. Participants shared concerns akin to those of the students they worked with, expressing feelings of shame and failure if they couldn't adequately address students' academic, social, and developmental needs.

Many participants faced challenges in balancing their heavy workloads and often felt overwhelmed, experiencing burnout and frustration due to high caseloads and non-counseling duties that diverted their focus from students. Despite assuming that high-achieving students in accelerated programs might have fewer mental health issues, counselors acknowledged that these students also dealt with anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, exacerbated by the pressures of advanced coursework and the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This mirroring of challenges became evident as counselors, while guiding students through their academic journeys, confronted their own overwhelming workloads, often resulting in feelings of inadequacy and stress. Moreover, both counselors and students grappled with the immense pressures of academic expectations. Counselors mediated between ambitious parental aspirations and students' well-being, attempting to strike a balance that would allow students to flourish academically without succumbing to mental health challenges. The parallel process also illuminated a shared vulnerability: Both counselors and students faced the daunting task of confronting mental

health issues, including anxiety and depression, exacerbated by the intricate demands of accelerated coursework and the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In essence, counselors found themselves caught in a parallel struggle, navigating their own emotional hurdles while guiding students through similar difficulties.

Amid this parallelism, the counselors' fear of failure and judgment further intertwined their experiences with those of their students. The pressure to meet expectations, both from within and from external sources, amplified their shared apprehensions. This fear of falling short added an additional layer of complexity to the parallel process, creating a profound sense of resonance between the counselors and the students they counseled.

In essence, the concept of a parallel process underscored the intricate connections between the challenges faced by counselors and high-achieving students, highlighting not only shared struggles but also shared vulnerabilities, fears, and emotional burdens. This parallelism deepened the counselors' understanding of the students' experiences while simultaneously emphasizing the counselors' need for support, recognition, and effective coping strategies.

Theme 3: Feelings of Being Undervalued

In this study, school counselors consistently voiced feelings of being undervalued, overworked, and unappreciated. They shared frustration regarding the lack of understanding about their roles among the staff. Misconceptions, such as being referred to as "guidance counselors" and stereotyped as individuals who simply handle schedule changes, were common sources of frustration. Additionally, counselors felt isolated,

especially when working alone in a school, lacking opportunities for collaborative planning or idea sharing. They expressed a sense of being overlooked and underrecognized, with their efforts unacknowledged by the administration.

Moreover, counselors highlighted the emotional toll of their work, dealing with sensitive information and often feeling drained. They emphasized the crucial role they played within the school environment, acting as the backbone and frontline observers of student dynamics. Despite this, their efforts often went unnoticed and unappreciated. The counselors also lamented the lack of respect for their time and expertise, with teachers, students, and administrators not comprehending the breadth of their responsibilities. Participant P01 shared that a sign was placed on the office door indicating “recording in progress; please do not disturb.” Three students knocked on the door during the interview, asking if the counselor had a moment to answer some questions they had.

A prevalent theme was the feeling of being unheard in decision-making processes. Counselors expressed frustration about decisions impacting their roles being made without their input, leaving them without a voice in shaping their own job responsibilities. This lack of involvement in decisions affecting their work added to their sense of undervaluation and dissatisfaction.

In summary, the study revealed a pervasive sentiment among school counselors: They felt undervalued, isolated, and unappreciated, with their contributions often misunderstood or overlooked by colleagues and administrators. Their experiences highlighted the need for a reevaluation of the understanding and acknowledgment of their roles within the school community.

Theme 4: Internalized Sense of Satisfaction

Participants in this qualitative research study, despite feeling undervalued and unappreciated, shared a deep-rooted passion for their roles as school counselors. Their motivation stemmed from a genuine desire to make a difference in students' lives. The participants expressed their commitment to guiding students through challenging academic paths, helping them become future-ready, and facilitating meaningful dialogues. For instance, Participant P06 emphasized the importance of dedicating extra time to accelerated students, demonstrating a profound dedication to their success.

The counselors found immense joy and pride in witnessing students excel, particularly in accelerated programs. They took personal satisfaction in assisting students in self-discovery, decision-making, and reaching their full potential. For instance, Participant P06 stressed the importance of being knowledgeable about graduation requirements and the college application process and having the ability to answer students' questions because accelerated students tended to challenge your responses. Counselors felt a sense of satisfaction when students realized they knew about the content discussed. Notably, participants derived fulfillment from watching students achieve milestones such as college acceptances and scholarships. Overcoming challenges such as GPA concerns with students presented opportunities for growth and resilience-building, highlighting the counselors' dedication to their students' well-being.

Despite the challenges, the counselors took pride in their roles, finding fulfillment in their students' successes. Witnessing students graduate on time, excel academically, form meaningful connections, and plan for their futures filled them with a sense of

accomplishment. For them, these moments of triumph validated their profession and reaffirmed their commitment to nurturing the next generation.

Summary

This chapter included a comprehensive summary of the analysis process, the research methods, and statements from participants that emerged as themes. The research question used in this study was, What are school counselors' experiences in providing services to high school students enrolled in accelerated academic programs? The following four themes were identified: intensity, parallel process, feelings of being undervalued; and an internalized sense of satisfaction.

The methods and strategies used by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) were used to identify the participants' developmental model across their lifespan. The counselors' narratives, feelings, and lived experiences were analyzed to obtain their perspective when working with students in accelerated programs. For many counselors, these years are hectic, and counselors are experiencing a sense of being on one's own at this stage. The counselor attempts to confirm the validity of their training, knowledge, and skills. The inexperienced counselor is usually unprepared for the level of work, responsibility, and setting practical professional goals at this stage. Counselors may experience a sense of guilt, fear, and anxiety due to the demands of the job. In their new role, counselors spend more time learning rather than working as counselors, making them feel out of balance. Chapter 5 will provide the interpretation of results of the study, review of the limitations, recommendations for future research, implications for change, and the summary and conclusion of this research project.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Even though high school students in accelerated academic programs have achieved higher academic success than their peers, they are not immune to mental health problems. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to examine the experiences of high school counselors working with students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. I sought to explore the experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students enrolled in accelerated educational programs to increase understanding of that phenomenon. I conducted this study to fill a significant gap in the literature related to the experiences of high school counselors in working with students in accelerated programs. Understanding the experiences of school counselors who work with students enrolled in accelerated programs can lead to a better understanding of these students' experiences and counseling needs.

The counselors in my research believed that working with this population would be easier than working with the general population. Several participants felt undervalued and unappreciated for their work providing services to accelerated program students. The school counselor's role is to help students with their academic, career, and social/emotional development so that all students can succeed and learn, guided by standards, evidence, and statistics (ASCA, 2019). Participants believe that the role of school counselors needs to be addressed and additional training is required, which could lead to developing expertise in providing services to students in accelerated academic programs. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the study's limitations,

recommendations for future research, and implications that can be drawn from the findings. Finally, the conclusions of the study will be presented.

Interpretations of the Findings

Using a phenomenological approach, I examined the lived experiences of high school counselors working with students in accelerated academic programs. Four key themes emerged during a thematic analysis of the data. During the interviews, all eight participants were open about their experiences working with accelerated academic students. The themes that emerged were the following: intensity, parallel process, counselors feeling undervalued, and an internalized sense of satisfaction. In this section, I will discuss each of the four emergent themes in more detail.

Intensity

Participants in this study found working with students in accelerated programs more demanding than expected. They highlighted the need for counselor education programs to prepare them adequately for this population. Managing large caseloads was a significant challenge, impacting their ability to meet students' needs effectively.

Parallel Process

Counselors experienced a parallel process, facing similar issues as their students, such as job demands and burnout. Balancing heavy workloads and non-counseling duties caused them to feel overwhelmed, leading to concerns about burnout and frustration.

Feelings of Being Undervalued

The literature and participants in this study suggest that counselors often feel unappreciated and undervalued. Their roles are not clearly defined, leading to feelings of

overwork and underappreciation. Clear communication and collaboration are seen as crucial in addressing this issue.

An Internalized Sense of Satisfaction

Despite the challenges, counselors expressed a deep passion for their roles and a commitment to helping students succeed. They found joy and pride in guiding students through challenging academic paths and facilitating meaningful dialogues, particularly with students in accelerated programs.

Limitations of the Study

The study's limitations, including participant population, recruitment methods, and data collection procedures, provide important insights into areas for improvement and future investigation. Firstly, the limitation of the participant population being sourced solely from a single school district suggests a need for broader sampling in future research. To enhance the generalizability of findings, future studies should consider recruiting participants from multiple school districts, encompassing diverse geographical locations and socio-economic backgrounds. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and practices of school counselors in different contexts.

Additionally, the method of participant recruitment may have influenced the composition of the sample and introduced biases. Future researchers should explore alternative recruitment strategies to ensure a more representative sample. Utilizing random sampling methods or collaborating with professional organizations could help recruit a diverse range of participants, reducing the risk of selection bias and enhancing the validity of the findings.

Furthermore, the data collection methods employed in the current study may have limitations in capturing the full range of experiences and perspectives of school counselors working with accelerated students. While saturation was reached with the eight participants interviewed, it is possible that additional data collection methods, such as surveys or focus groups, could provide complementary insights. Mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and practices of school counselors in supporting accelerated students.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides valuable insights into the experiences of high school counselors working with accelerated students within a specific district. The findings highlight the unique challenges and practices associated with working with student in accelerated programs, offering a foundation for further research. Future studies should build upon these findings by exploring the experiences of school counselors across diverse settings and populations.

Additionally, my position and relationship within the school district could have introduced biases that may have influenced the study's outcomes. While efforts were made to mitigate these biases through transparency and participant selection from distinct schools, further research should continue to prioritize transparency and ethical considerations. Researchers should clearly disclose their affiliations and potential conflicts of interest and take steps to minimize bias throughout the research process.

In conclusion, recommendations for further research should address the limitations of the current study while building upon its strengths. By expanding the

participant population, refining recruitment methods, and utilizing diverse data collection methods, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and practices of school counselors in supporting accelerated students. Additionally, continued emphasis on transparency and ethical considerations will help ensure the validity and reliability of research findings in this important area of study.

Recommendations

In this qualitative study, I employed phenomenological thematic analysis to address a gap in the existing literature by delving into the experiences of high school counselors when working with accelerated learners. The dissemination of findings has occurred via email to participants, supplemented by hard copies distributed within the school district. This dissemination aims to provide school administrators, counselor educators, and practicing counselors with insights into the unique challenges and practices encountered when supporting accelerated students. The study's outcomes are anticipated to enhance awareness and inform professional development initiatives in this domain.

One notable finding from the study is the revelation by participants that they felt ill-prepared for the substantial caseloads they encountered. As a response, counselors are encouraged to join counseling associations to advocate for appropriately staffed schools, aligning with the recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 set forth by the ASCA.

Furthermore, participants expressed dissatisfaction with their counselor education programs, noting a lack of preparation for the role of school counselors. They

emphasized that their training predominantly focused on counseling skills and theories, rather than practical aspects relevant to school counseling. To address this gap and better equip counselors to serve all students, including accelerated learners, collaboration between the ASCA, CACREP, and counselor education programs is essential. This collaboration should ensure that coursework and experiential learning opportunities encompass managing high caseloads, addressing mental health issues, and catering to the needs of students in specialized programs such as accelerated or gifted programs.

To better prepare counselors to effectively support all students, including accelerated learners, collaboration between professional organizations like the ASCA, the CACREP, and counselor education programs is crucial. ASCA and CACREP should collaborate with counselor education programs to align coursework with the specific needs of school counselors. This includes developing courses that focus on managing high caseloads, addressing mental health issues, and catering to the needs of students in specialized programs such as accelerated or gifted programs. The curriculum should emphasize practical skills and knowledge relevant to the school counseling setting.

Counselor education programs should provide students with hands-on experiences that simulate real-world scenarios encountered by school counselors. This may include internships or practicum placements in schools with diverse student populations, including accelerated learners. These experiences allow future counselors to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings and develop skills in working with different student groups. ASCA and CACREP can organize professional development workshops and training sessions for practicing counselors to enhance their skills in working with

accelerated students. These workshops could cover topics such as understanding the unique needs of accelerated learners, strategies for supporting their academic and socio-emotional development, and effective collaboration with teachers and parents.

Collaboratively, ASCA and CACREP can develop and disseminate resources, such as guidelines, best practices, and toolkits, to support counselors in their work with accelerated students. These resources can serve as reference materials for both counselor education programs and practicing counselors, providing them with practical strategies and interventions. By fostering collaboration among ASCA, CACREP, and counselor education programs, counselors and school districts can better prepare counselors to meet the diverse needs of all students, including accelerated learners. This coordinated approach ensures that counselor training and professional development efforts are aligned with the evolving demands of the school counseling profession and the needs of students in today's educational landscape.

In addition to these recommendations, further investigation into counselors' experiences in working with gifted students is warranted. Such research not only expands the existing literature but also holds potential to inform future qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods inquiries. By exploring counselors' perspectives and practices in this specific context, insights gained could contribute to the development of effective strategies and interventions tailored to the needs of gifted students within the school counseling framework.

Implications

The findings of this study hold significant potential for positive social change, particularly in equipping school counselors to effectively support accelerated learners amidst their emotional and social struggles. By aligning with the ASCA and the CACREP, this research can catalyze transformative shifts at individual, organizational, and societal levels.

At the individual level, the study sheds light on the experiences and challenges faced by counselors in serving accelerated learners. By incorporating Skovholt and Ronnestad's developmental model (1992), counselors can gain a deeper understanding of the unique needs of this population and tailor interventions accordingly. Theoretical implications include the integration of developmental theories into counselor training programs, ensuring that counselors are equipped with the knowledge and skills to address the diverse needs of accelerated learners.

Methodologically, the study underscores the importance of qualitative research in capturing the nuanced experiences of counselors. Future research could employ mixed-methods approaches to further explore the effectiveness of interventions aimed at supporting accelerated learners. Empirically, the findings highlight the need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of counseling services for this population.

Practically, the recommendations derived from this study have direct implications for counselor education programs. By aligning curriculum and experiential learning opportunities with the specific needs of accelerated learners, counselor educators can

better prepare future counselors to navigate the complexities of serving this population. ASCA and CACREP can play a pivotal role in facilitating this alignment by providing guidelines and resources for counselor education programs.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about the role of the school counselor in supporting accelerated learners. By increasing dialogue and sharing best practices, counselors can advocate for policy changes at the organizational and societal levels to ensure adequate support for accelerated learners. ASCA and CACREP can advocate for policies that promote smaller caseloads and increased resources for counselors working with accelerated learners, thereby enhancing their ability to provide effective services.

Overall, this study's implications for positive social change extend beyond the boundaries of the research itself, encompassing broader efforts to enhance the support system for accelerated learners within the educational landscape. Through collaboration, advocacy, and continued research, counselors and policymakers can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for accelerated learners, ultimately contributing to their academic success and overall well-being.

Conclusion

I explored the experiences of high school counselors as they navigate the intricate landscape of providing support to students enrolled in accelerated academic programs. Motivated by a desire to fill a notable gap in the existing literature, the study sought to shed light on the challenges faced by counselors in this context and underscore the critical importance of their role.

The findings of this study resonate deeply with the demanding nature of the counselor's job. Through reflective insights shared by counselors, a prevailing sentiment of frustration and undervaluation in providing services to accelerated students emerged. This illuminated concerns regarding high caseloads and the pressing need for additional counselors and training. Such revelations are not just informative but serve as a clarion call for action, urging counselor educators to reevaluate and enhance the preparation provided to counselors in navigating the complexities of supporting accelerated learners.

The professional literature has long overlooked the experiences and counseling needs of high school students in accelerated academic programs. By venturing into uncharted territory, this study brings to light a previously unexplored realm, enriching our understanding of both the challenges faced by counselors and the experiences of the students they serve. Armed with this newfound knowledge, counselor educators can tailor training programs to better equip counselors for this aspect of their responsibilities, ensuring that they are adequately prepared to meet the needs of accelerated learners.

Accelerated students, often characterized by their academic prowess, may find themselves grappling with unique challenges, including perfectionism and anxiety. Despite their academic success, these students may slip through the cracks, receiving less attention from counselors who may underestimate their emotional and psychological struggles. Yet, by recognizing and addressing these challenges head-on, counselors have the power to unlock the full potential of these promising individuals, enabling them to thrive not only academically but also emotionally and socially.

Indeed, the implications of this study extend beyond the realm of academia. They beckon society to recognize the invaluable contributions that academically successful students can make if provided with the necessary support and guidance during their formative high school years. By bridging the gap between research and practice, this study paves the way for transformative change, urging stakeholders to reevaluate and enhance the education provided to counselors, thus ensuring that they are equipped with the tools and knowledge to effectively support accelerated learners.

In essence, this study serves as a clarion call for action, urging stakeholders to address the gaps in counselor education and training programs to better support accelerated learners. By doing so, we not only enhance the relevance and quality of education in the field but also pave the way for a brighter future for academically successful students, empowering them to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

My name is Pamela D. Gardner, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Although you may recognize the researcher as a professional school counselor, this study is unrelated to that position. I would appreciate it very much if you would be willing to take part in a study that examines the experiences of school counselors who provide services to high school students in accelerated academic programs. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a professional school counselor with at least 2 years of experience working in a high school setting. It is entirely up to you whether you participate in this research project.

You will be asked to take part in a virtual interview with me to tell me about your experiences as a high school counselor. It will take approximately 60 minutes of your time to complete the virtual interview. The virtual interview will be conducted via Zoom and will include questions that you will be provided with prior to the interview. Your experiences as a high school counselor will be the only focus of the interview.

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study will pose minimal risk to your well-being.

The interview will be taped and transcribed solely for research reasons. Your personal information will be kept private. Throughout the study, your identity will remain confidential. All files will be saved on a password-protected hard drive that will be accessible only by me. All materials will be kept private and will not be shared with anybody without your written consent. Participation has several advantages, including an opportunity for you to reflect upon your work counseling students. Furthermore, your perspectives and experiences will add to the professional literature on school counseling.

Please contact me by replying to this email if you are willing to be interviewed or if you have any questions about the study. Thank you in advance for your contributions to this research project and the profession of school counseling.

Sincerely,

Pamela D. Gardner
Doctoral Student
Walden University

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

The first part of my interview with participants will be a brief introduction, followed by a discussion of the rationale for my research. First, I'll describe the study's goal, and then I'll ask each participant a series of questions. I'll follow up with more open-ended questions to elucidate any emerging themes.

Introduction

Thank you for consenting to be a part of the study. I'd like to learn more about school counselors' experiences working with high school students participating in accelerated academic programs. The goal of this research is to learn more about these students' experiences and counseling requirements.

Date:

Location:

Name of Interviewer:

Name of Interviewee:

Interview Number:

Interview Questions

1. How long have you had your master's degree?
2. How long have you been a high school counselor?
3. Tell me about your experiences working with students enrolled in accelerated programs.
4. How has counseling students enrolled in accelerated programs been different from counseling students who are not enrolled in accelerated programs?

5. How are the needs of students who are enrolled in accelerated programs different?
6. Have you had any students who have struggled with anxiety?
7. If so, how did you handle the situation?
8. Have you had students who have experienced substance abuse?
9. If so, how did you handle the situation?
10. Have you had students who have experienced depression?
11. If so, how did you handle the situation?
12. Have you had students who have experienced suicidal ideation?
13. If so, how did you handle the situation?
14. Have you had students who have experienced homelessness?
15. If so, how did you handle the situation?
16. Have you had students who have experienced bullying?
17. If so, how did you handle the situation?
18. Have you had students who have experienced physical health issues?
19. If so, how did you handle the situation?
20. Have you had students who have experienced pressure from parents to be successful?
21. If so, how did you handle the situation?
22. Tell me what is most challenging about counseling students in accelerated programs.

23. Tell me what is most rewarding about counseling students in accelerated programs.
24. Do you have anything else to tell me about your experiences working with accelerated students?