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School Principals' Perceptions of Hiring School Counselors

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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EdS, University of South Carolina, 2010

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

School principals are the primary hiring authorities in U.S. K-12 public schools when employing school counselors. Despite the expansion and diversification of schools' qualifications, characteristics, and roles, there is a gap in knowledge about principals' hiring perspectives, priorities, and specific criteria. These elements provide vital information for school counseling educational programs and organizational advocacy for hiring school counselors based on current standards and qualifications. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the perceptions of school principals regarding the hiring of school counselors. Targeting the research question "What are the perceptions of principals interviewing and hiring school counselors in U.S. K-12 public schools?" eight principals participated from U.S. K-12 public schools who had been in their roles for 5 years and had hired and supervised a school counselor for 2 years. Using semi-structured interviews and following Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis, the findings identified two key qualifications: that school counseling candidates were former teachers and had strong references. Three characteristics were identified: compassion, empathy, and flexibility. Findings suggest that principals' hiring practices are based on traditions, experience, and on-the-job training from other colleagues. Implications for social change can inform policies and practices to enhance inclusivity and diversify factors in hiring decisions for qualified individuals entering the school counseling profession. Implications for positive social change include more equitable and inclusive hiring practices and continuity between school counselors and principals in hiring requirements.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and friends. To my parents, thank you for your unconditional love and support and for the sacrifices you made to provide a nourishing environment for me to grow throughout my life. To my little sister, Michelle, for allowing me to be a big sister and for learning from each other. To my sons, Jonathan and Wynton, your love and encouragement have been essential in my educational journey.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my extended family, friends, uncles, aunts, and cousins. I loved growing up with family outings and vacations, during which I learned to appreciate the value of family. To my friends who have grown up with me through the years, Joan Parrott, Tracy Martin, and Phyllis Jackson, thank you for always being there. To my new friends, Joanie Rainey, Bernice Wilson, Richie Handy, and Sidney Crawford, I appreciate your friendship and support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

School principals are the primary hiring authorities in U.S. K-12 public schools when employing professional school counselors (Gonzales et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021; Ruiz et al., 2018). A better understanding of principals' experiences and thought processes in making an offer to a school counselor job candidate could influence how school counselors prepare for job interviews and the specific training they may need to be successful in their roles in the post-pandemic climate of today's public schools. For instance, there was a long-standing requirement for school counselors in most states to have prior teaching experience as a condition of their employment (Dudley & Ruff, 1970). However, that requirement gave way to principals looking for other qualifications that meet the needs of the learners they serve in their schools and districts. While previous teaching experience is not explicitly required, many states continue to make distinctions between school counselors who do not have teaching experience and school counselors with teaching experience. Historical employment hurdles have presented barriers for new professional school counselors. Now that states have moved away from requiring teaching experience, it is unclear if principals prefer candidates with teaching experience or other credentials (applied behavior analysis certification, licensed professional counselor, licensed professional clinical counselor, etc.) when interviewing school counseling candidates. Therefore, school principals' ability to employ highly qualified school counselors can increase overall student success within their school.

School counselors receive training in master's and doctoral preparation programs as leaders, advocates, collaborators, and agents of systemic change in schools (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2020). An extensive school counseling program prepares school counselors to meet the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2021; Lambie et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2021). Research demonstrates how the positive support school counselors provide to boost student success assists in better student decision-making skills and improves social, emotional, and academic development and higher graduation rates (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; Levy et al., 2021; Mulhern, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2018). Therefore, highly qualified applicants may be overlooked based on outdated criteria (Buchanan et al., 2017; Goodman-Scott et al., 2021).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the research study's background and describe the problem statement and purpose of the study. I discuss the conceptual framework that supports the study, the nature of the study, and the research question I used as the basis of my inquiry. In addition, the chapter includes operational definitions and assumptions and concludes with addressing the scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the research study.

Background

School counseling, like all roles within education, is constantly evolving to meet the needs of an ever-changing society. School counselors were originally *guidance counselors* (Herr, 2002). Then, states began to mandate the roles of school counselors with different expectations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school counselors took on

various roles that may not have aligned with what they learned during their education and training. Through all these changes, school principals have developed expectations of what a school counselor is and does, but those expectations may not match what school counselors are learning in their education programs.

Research studies have identified principals as the primary hiring authority for school counselors, making a principal's experience with employing and working with school counselors critical to examine (Gonzale et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021; O'Hara & Probst, 2016). Mitchell et al. (2021) compared certification requirements for specialized staff focusing on school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors. Michell et al. (2021) further suggested examining how educational administrators hire diverse staff, how this varies across states, and how certification standards affect the hiring process. Along these same lines, O'Hara and Probst (2016) acknowledged the importance and difficulty administrators face when hiring social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists. The researchers suggested administrators use a team in the hiring process to limit possible bias and when establishing prior criteria for candidates (O'Hara & Probst, 2016). However, these studies did not examine the selection process for hiring school counselors. Goodman-Scott et al. (2021) explored the hiring of school counselors from the perspective of district supervisors, who play a role in supporting new school district employees. Based on an exhaustive review of the literature, I identified a gap that exists regarding how principals view hiring school counselors and, more specifically, the qualifications they look for in successful school counseling candidates despite the changes in state policies regarding

the licensure requirements for school counselors in many states (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021; O'Hara & Probst, 2016).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing teacher shortage may have an impact on principals' views on hiring school counselor candidates. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 students have suffered adverse mental health concerns (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023). According to school counselors surveyed in Tennessee, there has been a pronounced increase in anxiety and depression among students (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023). The counselors in the study also noted a significant decline in students' academic performance (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023). Large caseloads and non-counseling-related assignments impact a school counselor's ability to identify and effectively support students with an increased risk of mental illness (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023). For school counselors, these factors, along with the noted ambiguity of the role of school counselors (Blake, 2022), make it increasingly important to understand the hiring practices of school principals for these roles.

Problem Statement

School counselors can contribute to students' growth, development, and advancement in their educational achievement. Goodman-Scott et al. (2021) noted that there has been limited to no research focusing on hiring practices for school counselor positions. In previous decades, there have been debates about whether school counselors should be classroom teachers first (Baker, 1994; Baker & Herr, 1976; Barret & Schmidt, 1986; Lister, 1969; Olson & Allen, 1993; Percy, 1996), but with the documented shortage of teachers in most states, prior teaching experience no longer seems to be a viable

expectation in current hiring practices of school counselors (Craig et al., 2023). As of September 2023, Texas dropped the requirement for school counselors to have 2 years' prior teaching experience (Texas Education Agency, 2023). Furthermore, states vary widely in the requirements for school counselor qualification and requirements to obtain certification or licensing. Mitchell et al. (2021) examined school social worker, psychologist, and counselor certification requirements and found a need for more research on the preparation of school-based mental health service providers like school social workers, psychologists, and counselors who are not state certified and how this affects hiring.

For school counselors, the ASCA is a professional organization dedicated to supporting school counselors in their roles and responsibilities. As an authority in the school counselor profession, ASCA sets standards that provide guidelines and expectations for school counselors in schools. However, there are instances in which the roles and responsibilities assigned to school counselors may differ from what is taught in schools. This is due to variations in the expectations and demands of school principals on their school counselors. Michell et al. (2021) suggested studying how educational administrators hire diverse staff and how state differences affect the hiring process. These variations can limit employment opportunities while also signaling confusion for hiring authorities.

Long-held traditions or concerns with school counselor competency may arise from a lack of understanding of the school counselor role in the 21st century. These issues and concerns can present obstacles for qualified school counselors without a

traditional teaching background. Therefore, simply having a policy that allows hiring school counselors without teaching experience may not prevent inequitable hiring practices from continuing. Teachers, parents, school boards, and administrators are also important stakeholders in schools, and their perceptions and their monetary contributions can impact principals' views and create challenges in the hiring process. The teacher shortage may present challenges for principals, which in some cases can lead to role confusion, thinking that school counselors can replace or stand in for teachers (Craig et al., 2023; Diamond et al., 2022).

Exploring the hiring experiences of school principals who interview and employ school counselors is essential to understanding what they look for in successful candidates and how they perceive their roles in their schools. Principals are the primary hiring authorities in K-12 public schools, and their experience can provide insight into the process. If principals express perceived deficits seen in unsuccessful candidates, this knowledge can provide vital information for university programs that prepare school counselors for work in U.S. public schools. The availability of more qualified school counselors may lead to more significant opportunities to improve students' academic achievement, careers, and social-emotional development (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2022; Lambie et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to understand the perceptions of school principals when hiring school counselors to serve the needs of their students, parents, and community stakeholders in U.S. K-12 public

schools. While information abounds about the positive support school counselors provide for student success, a gap exists in the scholarly literature on the hiring practices for school counselors across the United States. While some states require school counselors to have specific training in areas necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners, other states do not (ASCA, 2024). An exploration of school principals' hiring experiences may shed some light on what characteristics they look for and how they make decisions around the candidates they hire. Learning about the benefits or drawbacks of hiring school counselors with certain types of prior work experience will help educational institutions make wise choices in supporting students in finding employment and fostering the professional development of school counselors.

Through this study, I sought to add to the body of knowledge by better understanding what qualifications principals look for when hiring a school counselor. Furthermore, the findings from this research can provide insight to principals who are unaware of the unique characteristics that school counseling candidates possess that can contribute to cultivating positive school climates and the increased well-being of all students. If school principals are unaware of the role of the school counselor, they may not choose the most qualified candidates for their open positions and, instead, select candidates based on outdated or traditional practices. Scholars have noted the positive support that school counselors provide to boost student success, improve students' decision-making skills, support social, emotional, and academic development, and increase student persistence toward graduation (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; Levy et al., 2021; Mulhern, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2018).

Noting school counselors' positive impact on student development and their integral part in schools, administrators should strive to hire qualified school counselors who can meet all students' needs. By studying their hiring experiences, I had the opportunity to learn more about the qualifications principals look for in school counseling candidates.

Research Question

The research question guiding this qualitative study is: What are the perceptions of principals interviewing and hiring school counselors in U.S. K-12 public schools?

Conceptual Framework

To address the research question, I used a qualitative research study. The design grounding the study is hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research approach (Peoples, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows a researcher and participants to engage in a way that helps the researcher understand the participants' lived experiences (Peoples, 2021). Martin Heidegger (1974) argued that exploring lived experiences can reveal objective and subjective aspects of reality without distancing the researchers from these experiences. As a researcher using the hermeneutic circle approach, I sought to deeply understand the participants' lived experiences and interpret their responses through their perceptions to thoroughly understand a phenomenon (Alsaigh & Coyne; Peoples, 2021). Accordingly, Heidegger considered the researcher a valid component of the research process, existing as a participant within the world of being (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). To this extent, Heidegger coined the term *Dasein* or *being there* (Peoples, 2021, p. 32); Heidegger

believed there is no way for researchers to separate themselves from being within the world (People, 2021).

Phenomenological methodology is a robust research strategy well-suited for exploring school principals' lived experiences when hiring school counselors. I sought to gain a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of school principals and interpret participants' responses through the lens of their perceptions and assumptions (see Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). For this study, I selected individual semistructured interviews as my primary data collection method to investigate principals' perceptions of hiring school counselors. I used the hermeneutic phenomenology framework to explore the subjective experiences from their perceptions, interpretations, and meanings, through individual interviews.

Through the interviews, I collected data that could be analyzed and interpreted to illuminate and understand the phenomenon. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. This thematic analysis process offered considerable flexibility in interpreting interview data and facilitated handling large data sets by categorizing them into overarching themes. Based on this knowledge, I identified factors influencing principals' decision making within the hiring process. The findings of this study may contribute to the advancement of educational training and support for school counseling candidates seeking employment in U.S. K-12 public schools.

Nature of the Study

Using an interpretive phenomenological method, I gathered an in-depth and holistic understanding of school principals' perceptions and interpreted their responses

through the lens of their unique views (see Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). I used the hermeneutic phenomenology framework to explore subjective experiences from the principals' perceptions regarding hiring and interacting with school counselors during the hiring process. The semistructured interviews illuminated the process associated with principals' decision making when hiring school counselors. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, a versatile approach that researchers can customize to suit various types of research. Through this comprehensive data analysis, I identified five themes related to the phenomenon under review. This study's findings may contribute to advancing educational training opportunities for school counselors. This information could lead to more equitable and inclusive hiring of diversely trained school counselor candidates and more continuity between school counselors and principals in hiring requirements.

Definitions

American School Counselor Association (ASCA): An organization that provides guidelines for school counselors associated with the academic, career, and social-emotional development of K-12 students and that provides professional development opportunities and resources for school counselors. ASCA identifies the role and responsibilities of school counselors along with a national framework for developing a comprehension model (ASCA, 2019).

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP): An accrediting organization that provides school counselor preparation,

licensure, and practice standards for professional school counselors for students prekindergarten to 12th grade (CACREP, 2019).

Dasein: Means *being there*; according to Heidegger, people are Dasein because of the way they exist within the world (Peoples, 2021, p. 32).

Foresight: Preconceived knowledge about a phenomenon (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; People, 2021)

Hermeneutic circle: Formulated by Heidegger, this involves exploring the essence of an object's existence through a process of interpretation and understanding (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009).

Perception: A thought, belief, or opinion held by a group of people based on appearance (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

Professional identity: The extent to which individuals identify themselves as members of a profession and feel a sense of unity with it. Professional identity refers to how an individual aligns their roles, responsibilities, values, and ethical standards with the accepted practices of their profession (Macedon-Mann & Tuttle, 2023).

School counselor: Master's level educators with a background in counseling and education theories who typically work in kindergarten through 12th-grade educational settings to assist students with their academic, career, social, and emotional needs (Blake, 2020).

School principal: The head administrator of a school responsible for managing and overseeing all aspects of the school's operations. School principals are responsible

for ensuring students receive a quality education and for meeting the school community's needs (Mayes et al., 2020).

Successful candidate: A selected candidate who accomplishes their aim or purpose of being hired (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Assumptions

Assumptions are statements presumed to be valid for a specific purpose in a research study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Three assumptions supported this study. First, I assumed principals would be willing to share insight into their process of recruiting, hiring, and retaining school counselors. The second assumption was that participants would provide authentic and relevant answers to my questions in the interview process. Finally, I assumed I would receive new perspectives and insights that differed from my prior experiences as a school counselor. These assumptions supported underlying beliefs and values impacted by my subjective realities and experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study was limited to licensed school principals within the United States who hire school counselors to work under their supervision and had worked with them for 2 or more years following the hiring process. The study included only principals who have worked for at least 5 years in U.S. K-12 public schools. Selecting a minimum experience level for school principals ensured they had time to adjust to their role, including hiring school personnel. Principals who work with school counselors must have completed at least two annual evaluations of the school counselors' performance (see Mayes et al., 2020). Researchers have noted that each school has unique needs according

to its makeup, and new faculty often need adjustment time (Robinson et al., 2019). The adjustment time for a school counselor and experience in the role for at least 2 years would support a principal's basic understanding of the school counselor's performance post-hiring.

I collected data through individual semistructured interviews. The primary benefit of interviews is that they provide a comprehensive description and analysis of a research topic without restricting the scope of the study or the participant responses (Philipps & Mrowczynski, 2021). The study allowed for a clear understanding of the selection process for school counselors and the performance of the school counselor after being acclimated to the school environment.

The delimitations of a study are characteristics arising from the limitations in the scope of the research and the definition of the boundaries and decisions made during the development of the study. The first delimitation of the study included only principals with 5 years of experience working as public school principals. I excluded principals with less experience because they may have limited administrative practices to provide sufficient involvement to answer the research question adequately. Next, I used purposive and snowball sampling to identify eight to 10 participants for semistructured interviews. Two participants of the study were identified through snowball sampling. Findings from the study support an understanding of the key factors that principals perceive as necessary in hiring and working with school counselors with certain types of work experience and identifying gaps in school counselor job readiness.

A delimitation for the study is that the participants were school principals working in public schools who had hired school counselors. The study excluded principals working (or with experience limited to) private and charter schools because these organizations have their own employment guidelines and historically are not regulated by public education state statutes (U.S. News, 2024). An in-depth description of the target population supported transferability, including identifying characteristics. The criteria for participants in this study were public school principals in the United States with 5 years or more experience in their roles who have hired and worked with K-12 school counselors for at least 2 years. There was no gender or age requirement for the participants. Therefore, the study may not be generalizable but is transferable in the search to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of principals in selecting and working with school counselors.

Limitations

In this phenomenological study, I sought to describe the lived experiences of principals who had recruited, hired, and worked with school counselors, which has a few limitations. The study's limitations included time constraints for the participants and the researcher, which did not allow for extensive interviews outside 45–60 minutes. Several factors support sample size in phenomenological research studies, such as the research question, the study's purpose, and the nature of the study (Patton, 2015). However, the transferability of the findings is limited to school principals who fit the study's criteria. As a school counselor, I must be aware of my bias and forethought and its influence on

the study (see Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). I employed journaling as a method of reflexivity as I conducted interviews and analyzed data (see Ide & Beddoe, 2023).

Significance

This study is significant in that its findings can contribute to the advancement of hiring qualified professional counselors who meet the needs of the students they will serve through the lens of the principals who hire them. School principals' decision making is crucial because it can serve as a first step toward removing barriers for future school counselor candidates. In some U.S. states, a shortage of qualified school counselors and their retention after hiring may complicate the decision. Current state licensure requirements for professional school counselors, historical policies for teaching experience, and the ambiguity of the role of school counselors may present barriers in the hiring process. Therefore, interviewing the participants about their hiring practices was crucial to understanding the issue comprehensively. By incorporating school principals' perspectives, I aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the challenges and opportunities associated with hiring qualified school counselors in various districts nationwide. The findings of this study could potentially inform policies and practices aimed at enhancing inclusivity and diversifying the pool of qualified individuals entering the school counseling profession, ultimately benefiting students and educators. The findings may support recommendations for training principals in school counselors' expertise to help them hire qualified school counselors. Furthermore, it can support training for school counselors to prepare them for showcasing their skills and talents in interviews and employment.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I described the background of the study along with the problem statement and the purpose of the study. I discussed the study's problem and shared the research questions guiding the study. This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, which was well-suited for the research topic (Babbie, 2017). I further discussed the data collection methods, the use of individual semistructured interviews, and the data analysis process that followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Additionally, I discussed the significance and nature of the study and explained its assumptions. I provided operational definitions of essential terms that I used in the study to ensure readers understand the context of the study. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the study's scope, delimitations, and limitations.

In Chapter 2, I describe my literature search strategy, sharing the research databases and search engines used. I also discuss the conceptual framework used in the study and the phenomenology methodology design. I then offer an exhaustive literature review of key concepts in hiring school counselors in U.S. K-12 public schools. The chapter concludes with a concise summary of the information.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

School counselors are in a position to contribute to student growth, development, and advancement in educational achievement (Donohue et al., 2022; Lawrence & Stone, 2019). Therefore, hiring qualified school counselors is beneficial for K-12 schools. School counselors support students' academic performance, personal and career development, and general well-being by offering academic, social-emotional, and counseling support (Mulhern, 2020). Counselors support mental health, build strong relationships, and assist students in acquiring critical life skills (Mulhern, 2020). Nonetheless, Goodman-Scott et al. (2020) noted that there has been limited research exploring hiring practices for school counselors.

Throughout the past 45 years, there have been discussions about whether school counselors should be classroom teachers as a foundation for their role as school counselors (Baker, 1994; Beale, 1995; McGlothlin & Miller, 2008; Olson & Allen, 1993; Percy, 1996; Stein & DeBerard, 2010). However, several states have different standards for school counselors, which could affect hiring practices. For example, Colorado requires school counselors to obtain a special services license (Colorado Department of Education, 2024). In contrast, Indiana requires school counselors to have CPR and suicide training (Indiana Department of Education, 2024). South Dakota is similar to Indiana in requiring suicide training, but South Dakota further requires suicide prevention training (South Dakota Department of Education, 2024). Of course, having a policy that allows hiring school counselors without teaching experience or other types of

professional experience or training may not remove past traditions or concerns about whether teachers make better school counselors in practice.

However, several states have changed their licensure/certification requirements for counselors over the past 5 years to reflect the changing needs of students (Department of Education, 2023). Through this qualitative study, I aimed to understand the experiences of school principals when hiring and working with school counselors. Examining principals' hiring strategies may help educational institutions make wise choices and foster the professional development of school counselors in the post-pandemic world. I also hope to add to the body of knowledge on school counseling by examining the experiences of school leaders, which may inform how school counselors are trained and supported during licensure and hiring processes.

The insight gained from school principals' challenges and advantages noted in hiring practices may provide educational institutions with information to support the professional growth of school counselors. Researchers have noted the positive support that school counselors provide to boost student success; decision-making skills; social, emotional, and academic development; and higher graduation rates (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; Levy et al., 2021; Mulhern, 2020). However, despite the significance of the role of professional school counselors and their vital role in student development, there has been a lack of comprehensive research exploring the factors influencing a principal's selection and evaluation process of applicants.

This study was conducted to better understand school principals' decision-making process when hiring school counselors. This may serve as a first step toward identifying what school principals consider when making hiring decisions for future school counselor candidates. Hiring practices may also need to be revised, as administrators may need to be better educated about the role and the training school counselors receive to support the changing needs of students, parents, and community partners. In addition, this could lead to an understanding of possible concerns administrators may have in response to the COVID pandemic and its impact on students.

Without the necessary support from educators, counselors may face difficulties establishing rapport and trust, hindering their ability to work collaboratively with students, families, and teachers. Therefore, to answer the research questions, I conducted individual interviews with school principals to gain a holistic understanding of their lived experiences and to interpret their responses through the lens of their perception of hiring and working with school counselors. The literature suggests there are no set guidelines or approaches when it comes to hiring school counselors (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021). The hiring process is a critical aspect of school administration, as it determines the quality of the staff who will guide and support students' academic and personal growth (Lawrence & Stone, 2019). Conducting individual interviews with school principals can provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by school counselors in establishing rapport and trust, as well as their ability to work collaboratively with students, families, and teachers.

In this chapter, I will share the theoretical foundation of the study. The theoretical foundation includes discussing phenomenology and hermeneutics. Heidegger, the founder of hermeneutic phenomenology, introduced the concept of the hermeneutic circle, which encompasses the interconnected nature of understanding and interpretation (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). As a researcher using the hermeneutic circle approach, I sought to gain a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences and to interpret their responses through the lens of their own biases and assumptions to obtain a thorough knowledge of a phenomenon (see People, 2021). Further discussion will include a review of historical and current literature about principal hiring practices for U.S. K-12 public school counselors. The discussion will specifically examine hiring school counselors, school counselors' roles and responsibilities, required and preferred training, and the importance of professional organizations in supporting school counselors. Through an exhaustive review of the literature on school counseling changes, principals' hiring practices will support insight and understanding of how school counseling candidates are selected and hired for their role in schools.

Literature Search Strategy

In this literature review, I sought information on requirements for professional school counselors to work in schools, including educational requirements, licenses, certifications, and experience. I collected information via electronic databases through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. The databases searched were Library Search (formerly Thoreau), PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, Eric, SAGE Journals, SAGE Knowledge, Education Source, and ProQuest One

Academic. I used the websites of the following organizations in the process of research: American Counseling Association, ASCA, and CACREP.

I used the reference lists from relevant articles for additional resources to broaden my search. I used the following keywords to gather information about my topic: *professional school counselor, school counselors, guidance counselor, hiring requirements for school counselors, the role of principals in hiring school counselors, principals' perception of school counselors, school counselor identity, roles and functions of school counselors, selecting school counselors, school counselors selection, teaching experience for school counselors, school counselor employment, hiring process, hiring practice, employee selection, recruitment selection, K-12 education, K-12 employment, K-12 employment, K-12 hiring, employment K-12, staffing K-12, hiring school staff, school counselors role during COVID, school staff and COVID, COVID changes in school, COVID impact K-12,* and *COVID impact on school counseling*. PsycINFO returned 251 peer-reviewed scholarly articles related to school principals–counselors, with 19 articles relevant and studied in the review. The SAGE database yielded 2,476 in the issue search, of which I reviewed 30 articles and saved 12 articles. Education Source yielded 177 articles for consideration, with five articles supporting principals' perceptions of school counselors, the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, school counselor identity, and one article on hiring practices within the date range. Relevant foundation and historical articles outside the data range were selected from ERIC, five reviewed articles, and ProQuest One Academic, two articles. I

determined that I had reached saturation in the relevant literature once my research provided no new articles published between 2019 and 2024.

In addition, I used APA PsycINFO, PsycArticles, and Internet Archive with the keywords *phenomenology, hermeneutics, hermeneutics circle*, and *interpretive phenomenology*. The search of these databases yielded 8,336 peer-reviewed articles. Limitations were set for articles supporting the foundation of phenomenology, theories, hermeneutic circle, and hermeneutics, reducing the number to 890 articles. I selected eight articles from this number and books from my personal library supporting the study's theoretical framework.

Conceptual Framework

School principals' decision making is crucial because it may be the first focus toward removing barriers to becoming hired as school counselors for future school counselor candidates. Therefore, participating in an interview and asking participants to identify latent and apparent factors that play a role in the hiring experience is crucial to understanding the issue comprehensively. Addressing these views directly can help work toward fostering more inclusive and diverse school counseling workforces, ultimately benefiting students and educators.

There is a gap in the literature concerning the hiring practices of school counselors (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021). Employing a qualitative research method supports meaningfully understanding principals' experiences in the hiring process of and working with school counselors. Qualitative research is commonly used in the humanities and social sciences in subjects such as anthropology, sociology, and education (Babbie,

2017). This type of research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Typical approaches used in qualitative research are grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, phenomenology, and case study (Burkholder et al., 2020). However, in this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenology theoretical framework to understand the perceptions of school principals who hire and work with school counselors.

Phenomenological

Phenomenology methodology is a robust research strategy well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of school principals when hiring school counselors (see Peoples, 2021; Peters & Vereen, 2020). I sought to gain a holistic understanding of school principals' perceptions and interpret their responses through the lens of their thought processes. I used the hermeneutic phenomenology framework to explore the subjective experiences, from their perceptions, interpretations, and meaning through individual interviews. Phenomenology is also considered an inductive qualitative approach that is rich in determining how people understand meaning. The thought behind phenomenology is that reality is not set but based on the varied realities of the subjects (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

Phenomenology originated with the philosophical works of Edmond Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl is considered phenomenology's father (Peoples, 2021). There are two perspectives within phenomenology: descriptive and interpretive. In Husserl's view, phenomenology should be descriptive (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). In descriptive phenomenology, a researcher explores, describes, and analyzes the phenomenon while

keeping its richness, breadth, and depth (People, 2021). According to Husserl, meaning is derived from a subject's intention or what the subject focuses on intentionally (Creely, 2018). The distinguishing feature of Husserl's phenomenology is the concept of philosophical reduction (Peoples, 2021). This concept involves removing a researcher's preconceived notions of a phenomenon. Husserl sought to attain a pristine phenomenon's essence and maintained that the researcher should make no assumptions or presuppositions to comprehend the data (Creely, 2018). Husserl was particularly interested in discovering a method through which individuals could gain a precise understanding of their own experience of a phenomenon by employing the bracketing technique (Smith et al., 2012). Bracketing entails abstaining from making evaluations and eliminating the researcher's personal experiences from the research procedure (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2012). I used the interpretive perspective for this study because a researcher must acknowledge any preconceived notions.

Hermeneutic Circle/Dasein

Martin Heidegger investigated the meaning of being in the world through a hermeneutic circle, taking phenomenology from an interpretive approach (Beck, 2019). Heidegger formulated the notion of being in the world, or Dasein, as he recognized it to be the fundamental way humans construct the structure of their experiences (Beck, 2019; People, 2021). Heidegger theorized that human beings cannot detach from their encounters with existence and the significance attributed to those encounters (Beck, 2019). Heidegger formulated the idea of a hermeneutic circle, which involves exploring the essence of an object's existence through a process of interpretation and understanding

(Beck, 2019; McConnell-Henry, 2009). Before entering the circle, the researcher must have comprehended or acquired knowledge of their pre-existing conditions, foresight, and preconceived notions (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Hence, interpretation occurs under the premise that the researcher is an integral component of the social realm (Beck, 2019). As I mentioned, I used the interpretive perspective for this study because a researcher must acknowledge preconceived notions. Through this process, I sought to understand and interpret texts, phenomena, or events based on the principles of hermeneutics (see Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Peoples, 2021). School principals are a part of the school culture, and hermeneutic phenomenology is employed to comprehend the lived experiences of a particular population (Peoples, 2021). To this extent, I aim to uncover the meanings and understand the phenomenon's underlying context and intention (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

Applications and Rationale

Several studies have employed phenomenological approaches to explore the lived experiences of educators such as principals, teachers, and school counselors (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Buchanan et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2021; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; McPherson, 2020). The knowledge gained from these studies using a phenomenological approach provided an in-depth understanding of each group's lived experience as it related to the phenomena the researchers were investigating while exposing gaps in the research concerning principals' hiring perception and teachers' perceptions of school counselors (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Buchanan et al., 2017).

As a researcher employing a hermeneutic circle approach, I will actively engage with the participants to understand their lived experiences holistically. By listening to their stories, observations, and interpretations, I aim to comprehend their experiences through the lenses of their own biases and assumptions (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This collaborative process will enable me to understand a particular phenomenon comprehensively. As a school counselor who did not work as a teacher before being hired, I must be aware of my own bias and forethought and the influence it may impose on the present research studied (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). My self-awareness will enable me to approach the phenomenon with an open mind, avoiding my preconceived assumptions and biases. As a researcher exploring the experiences of school principals, the hermeneutic framework incites reflexibility, reflexivity, and self-awareness (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). In the research process, reflexibility refers to the researcher's ability to be open to new ideas and a willingness to adjust their thinking. Reflexivity is when the researcher can acknowledge their biases or assumptions that may impact the study. Understanding the potential biases and the researcher's open-mindedness supports self-awareness. Self-awareness is recognizing potential biases through personal reflection to mitigate their impact on the research study. Reflexibility, reflexivity, and self-awareness are integral aspects of research that contribute to the quality and integrity of the research process (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

Hermeneutics also provides a flexible and iterative study methodology, and novice researchers like me can continually review data, allowing me to expand my understanding and embrace new insights through the iterative process (Alsaigh & Coyne,

2021). Furthermore, the participants' experiences in the study will be understood by hearing their observations and interpretations of their perceptions when hiring and working with school counselors.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section of the literature review chapter, I provide a comprehensive overview of the most pertinent research on this study's specific topic under investigation. The study's research problems, research questions, and gaps in knowledge are illuminated by existing literature. I present a comprehensive analysis of scholarly literature regarding school principals' perceptions and challenges in recruiting, hiring, and their experience working with school counselors.

History of the School Counselors Profession

The historical origins of school counseling began exceptionally differently from the inception of the role of school counselors in the 21st century (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). In the United States, school counseling emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s in response to social, political, and economic developments outside the classroom (Akos & Duquette, 2022; Herr, 2013). Moreover, Frank Parson, regarded as the pioneer of vocational guidance, thought schools should focus less on book studies and more on working, and students should take part-time courses in industrial science and culture (Herr, 2013). School counselors were titled vocational guidance, and the role of vocational guidance was to support the vocational transition of students moving into career professions (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). During this time, the teachers provided guidance and counseling, including social and career guidance (Schmidt, 2008).

As the school counseling field continued to develop in the 1940s, Carl Rogers developed a theory of counseling that focused on the client. The client-centered theory emphasizes the therapeutic relationship, and researchers noted several benefits, among which were psychological adjustment and accelerated learning (Schmidt, 2008). Carl Roger's work significantly impacted school counseling, and the term guidance began to shift to counselor (Lambie & Williams, 2004). The launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957 and concerns about other countries surpassing the United States in mathematics and science prompted increased backing for school counseling (Schmidt, 2008). In 1958, the National Defense Education Act began, significantly impacting the career counseling movement. The primary objective of the National Defense Education Act was to facilitate the progress of education in science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages. The schools' curricula were preparing young White men for professions in law, medicine, or religion (Schmidt, 2008). With the progression of guidance in school, opportunities were available for White women.

Herr (2003) further explains that these developments included the nation's migration from rural to urban areas, the industrial revolution, and worries about child labor. The legislation from the 1960s highlighted the role of the school counselor as a career guide and how well schools prepare their pupils for the workforce (Herr, 2013; Schmidt, 2008). Four national professional education models began in the 1970s under the Professional Education Incentive Act of 1978, which Congress repealed in 1981 (Herr, 2003). These models highlighted the importance of school counselors in achieving

educational and workforce development objectives by offering career assistance and counseling (Herr, 2003).

The American Council of Guidance and Personnel Association began in 1935. Then, the organization aligned with the American College Personnel Association, the National Association of Guidance Supervisors, the National Vocational Guidance Association, and the Student Personnel Association for Teacher Education. These organizations shared a common concern in education, vocational guidance, and personnel issues. The American Council of Guidance and Personnel Association began the ASCA, making it the fifth division of the Association. Then, in the 1900s, there was a transition supported by the ASCA (1997), a significant change from focusing on career guidance provided primarily by teachers and administrators to a comprehensive program offered by school counselors who collaborate closely with teachers, parents, and administrators to focus on all students' academic, career, and personal-social development (ASCA, 2019; Gysber, 2010). The role changed from the teacher-counselors of the first half of the 20th century into full-time guidance counselors (Gysber, 2010). The shift in the role and title of school counselors encompassed a change in the duties and functions of the school counselor (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021).

An important factor in school counselors' changing roles and duties began with the introduction of the ASCA National Model in 2003, which aimed to standardize the role of professional school counselors in the United States (ASCA, 2003). Before and during this period, many states required school counselors to be hired and work in the schools for former classroom teachers (Dudley & Ruff, 1970). Another critical factor that

led to the shift in the role and duties of school counselors was the increasing recognition of the importance of mental health services in schools (Gysber, 2010). Overall, the shift from teacher-counselors to full-time counselors represents a significant transformation in the role and responsibilities of school counselors. In 2020 U. S. schools closed for a period during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that once again reshaped and transformed the role of school counselors.

American School Counselor Association

In 1952, the ASCA began its formation as a branch of the American Personnel and Guidance Association. However, it was not until 2003 that the ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs was released (Gysbers, 2010). The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs provides standards for student academic, career, and personal/social development (Gysbers, 2010). School counselors' focus expanded beyond vocational to include mental health and wellness aspects of student development (ASCA, 2007; Gysbers, 2010; Lambie et al., 2019). According to the ASCA (2019b), school counselors must have specific competencies in assessment, appraisal, advising, counseling interventions, special education, and referral for their school counselor roles.

School counselors are expected to offer various direct and indirect services in multiple settings, such as parent and teacher consultation, group counseling, one-on-one counseling, and primary prevention programs (Fan et al., 2019). School counselors participate in the school-based counseling program's administration, planning, and assessment and act as student advocates (Bledsoe et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2019). They

support students in learning how to make decisions and deal with difficult circumstances. School counselors receive crisis intervention training, react to crises and emergencies in the school environment, offer prompt assistance, and collaborate closely with mental health specialists and administrators to guarantee the security and welfare of all staff members and students (ASCA, 2019). ASCA (2019) requires school counselors to be committed to preventing harassment and bullying in schools and fostering a positive school climate.

School counselors also uphold the ethical and professional standards of ASCA, the professional organization that provides resources, training, and advocacy (ASCA, 2019). As a result of ASCA (2016), professionals in the school counseling field strive to standardize their practice to support all students as they develop socially, emotionally, and academically. While school counselors get their expected duties and responsibilities from ASCA, there are also resources for hiring them. Additionally, ASCA (2019) provides suggestions for the characteristics of school counselors and possible interview questions for hiring authorities. Examining the issues surrounding hiring school counselors and the selection process is crucial to support the further development of the school counseling profession.

Teaching Versus Non-Teaching

Historically, teachers provided vocational guidance for students (Herr, 2002), but as the role shifted to school counselors, they were required to be former classroom teachers (Dudley & Ruff, 1970). Whether school counselors should be former teachers has been debated since 2001 (Baker, 1994; Baker & Herr, 1976; Olson & Allen, 1993;

Smith et al., 2001). However, changes were taking place in the field of school counseling that moved to allow non-teachers to become school counselor counselors (ASCA, 2020; Beale, 1995; Paisley & Hubbard, 1989). In 1994, Baker conducted a literature review on mandatory teaching experience for school counselors and found no significant differences in counselor ratings between those with teaching experience and those without. The literature review explored whether there was a considerable difference in counselor ratings between school counselors with teaching experience and those without (Baker & Herr, 1976; Beale, 1995; Olson & Allen, 1993). The finding was important for the field of school counseling as it provided evidence supporting the movement of non-teachers becoming school counselors. It suggested that experience as a teacher was not the sole determinant of effective counseling skills and competence in school settings. These findings challenged school counselors' traditional teaching experience requirement and created opportunities for individuals with various backgrounds to contribute their expertise to the field.

However, Beale's (1995) study found that 50% of principals believed teaching experience to be very important for school counselors. Beale conducted a survey of Virginia public school principals to gain further insights into the process of selecting school counselors. The study offers a framework that other researchers can utilize to investigate selection practices in their fields. Additionally, the findings raise critical professional inquiries that apply to anyone involved in school counselors' training, performance, and selection. At least 50% of the principals considered school counseling experience and prior teaching experience significant, with counseling experience being

more highly valued than teaching experience. Only a quarter of the principals surveyed considered work experience outside the field of education to be necessary when making selection decisions. Indeed, a majority of 62% of the participants regarded external work experience as relatively unimportant. However, Beale (1995) is a historical study, and there have been significant shifts in school counselors' responsibilities, policies, and views of school counseling since then. However, it does not mean that old perceptions have not remained.

Goodman-Scott et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative research study exploring the district-level school counseling supervisors' experience and perception of new school counselors. The study found that district-level school counseling supervisors appreciated candidates with prior teaching experience. Furthermore, district-level school counselors indicated they prefer hiring school counselors with the CACREP accredited preparation programs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). District-level counseling supervisors also noted that emerging school counselors often experience a sense of being overburdened as they grapple with conflicting responsibilities and expectations and notice disparities between their training and actual work (Goodman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, they value mentorship and assistance from experienced school counseling professionals who can address inquiries, offer resources, explain policies and procedures, and provide valuable feedback.

Beale's (1995) study and Goodman-Scott et al. (2020) note that the participants preferred hiring school counselors with prior teaching experience. Nevertheless, several studies have found that school counselors without a teaching background are as effective

as those with a teaching background (Baker, 1994; Mulhern, 2020; Olson & Allen, 1993; Stien & DeBerard, 2010). For example, a study by Stein and DeBerard (2010) examined the relationships between counseling interns' performance with or without teaching experience. The results did not identify differences between counselors with and without teaching experience in their performance evaluations. Stein and DeBerard's (2010) study revealed that group differences exist when students enter graduate programs, but training programs can give participants enough chances to be productive in the classroom.

In other studies, classroom management is one significant difference between school counselors without teaching experience (Bringman & Lee, 2008; Peterson et al., 2004). Bringman and Lee (2008) found that prior teachers were more comfortable providing classroom guidance lessons. At the same time, Peterson et al. (2004) noted that non-teacher counselors found classroom management challenging. Furthermore, school counselors with prior teaching experience struggle to adjust to a new professional identity. Buchanan et al. (2017) study on novice school counselors' experience in classrooms found that experience helps, yet new counselors, with or without a teaching background, still experience anxiety in the classroom setting (Buchanan et al., 2017). The district-level school counseling supervisor also noted concerns with the new school counselor and classroom management. The aspect of experience in the classroom for new school counselors is addressed through practicum and internship requirements during training (CACREP, 2024). Therefore, based on the literature reviewed, several studies have found that counselors who were not formal teachers were just as effective in their

role as school counselors as former teachers (Baker, 1994; Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023; Mulhern, 2020; Olson & Allen, 1993; Stien & DeBerard, 2010).

The role of school counselors continues to evolve (Bledsoe et al., 2022; Geiger & Ocherman, 2020), and 48 states in the United States have removed the necessity for teaching experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). It is essential for principals to carefully evaluate the qualifications of each applicant and consider their individual experiences when determining the most suitable candidates for school counselor positions. Principals should evaluate each candidate's qualifications, including their educational background, training, and relevant experience, to determine the most suitable candidates for school counselor positions in their schools.

COVID-19 and School Counseling

Nevertheless, the school counseling profession underwent another significant change with a global pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, school counselors faced numerous challenges in effectively supporting students. The shift to virtual environments presented difficulties for school counselors in connecting with their students and maintaining the same level of counseling services. Additionally, school counselors found themselves grappling with high caseloads (Brown-Knight, 2023; Donohue et al., 2022; Mulhern, 2020), working diligently to close opportunity and achievement gaps, and being assigned inappropriate duties (Blake, 2020). These challenges were further exacerbated amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly impacting the education workforce, particularly K-12 (Bleiberg& Kraft, 2022). The workforce market for K-12 employees saw a reduction in employment, attributed to the adjustment to online education (Bleiberg

& Kraft, 2022). The shift toward virtual learning created new challenges for school counselors, as it limited their ability to connect with students physically and meet social, emotional, and academic support (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023).

Post-pandemic saw an increase in behavioral issues, anxiety, depression, trauma, and changes in eating and sleeping habits (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023; Hertz & Barrios, 2021). With noted deficiencies in students' academics, mental health concerns were deprioritized in some schools (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). Blake (2020) highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the vital role that school counselors play in supporting students' mental well-being and academic success. The concerns raised by school counselors throughout the pandemic highlight the need for school administrators to understand our roles outside of being social and emotional learning support. Gonzalez et al. (2022) emphasize the need for administrators to recognize school counselors' unique skill sets and contributions to ensure they have the necessary resources and support to fulfill their responsibilities.

Expectations of School Counselors

The role of school counselors has evolved significantly over the years (Bledsoe et al., 2022; Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020; Herr, 2013; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Schmidt, 2008). Traditionally, school counselors were primarily responsible for providing guidance and the vocational needs of students in the 1900s (Herr, 2003). However, their roles have expanded, and today, school counselors play a pivotal role in the educational setting (Bledsoe et al., 2022; Donohue et al., 2022; Geiger & Oehrtman, 2020; Mulhern, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). According to ASCA (n.d.), school counselors enhance

student outcomes by integrating their school counseling program with the school's academic mission and improvement plan. School counselors advocate for equity and access for all students (Donohue et al., 2022).

Further, school counselors need strong communication skills to effectively interact with students, parents, teachers, and administrators. All counselors must be able to listen actively, provide clear guidance, and articulate concerns to the appropriate individuals (ASCA, 2019a). They should possess a high level of empathy and compassion, allowing them to connect with students on an emotional level. This characteristic can establish trust and provide a safe space for students to share their thoughts and feelings. The ASCA (2019a) expects school counselors to be culturally sensitive and competent to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Along these same lines, school counselors must adhere to ethical guidelines and practice confidentiality to protect students' privacy and prioritize student well-being (ASCA Ethical Standards, 2022).

A school counselor must plan, facilitate, and implement a comprehensive school counseling program by working collaboratively with school administrators, staff, and community members to achieve measurable outcomes (ASCA, n.d.; Gysbers, 2010). One fundamental expectation of school counselors is to remove obstacles that hinder a student's success. School counselors may work with students who struggle with academic, social, or emotional difficulties. School counselors provide individual counseling sessions, small groups, and classroom interventions to help students overcome obstacles and reach their full potential (ASCA, 2019). School counselor's expertise,

dedication, and ability to remove barriers that hinder a student's success make them invaluable educational community members.

Research has shown that school counselors significantly impact student success (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; Levy et al., 2021; Mulhern, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2018). Students with access to school counselors experience increased academic achievement, improved graduation rates, better attendance, decreased disciplinary referrals, and increased community involvement (Donohue et al., 2022). School counselors play a crucial role in identifying and addressing academic, social, and emotional barriers to learning. School counselors work closely with teachers, parents, and other professionals to create a supportive, inclusive school environment that fosters student growth and achievement.

Responsibilities of School Counselors

ASCA (2019) listed the key responsibilities of school counselors: academic, social-emotional, career, guidance and counseling, crisis intervention, school climate, and bullying prevention. School counselors support students' academics by working closely with students, teachers, and parents to identify academic strengths and weaknesses. They provide academic counseling, help students set goals, and create plans to overcome challenges. Counseling also addresses students' social-emotional development, providing support to help them with challenges that may arise in their relationships with peers and family. School counselors further promote positive mental health by teaching students coping strategies and offering counseling (ASCA, 2019).

School counselors also support students' career exploration and promote understanding between what students learn in school and the world of work by conducting career fairs and providing purposeful career activities to all students (Oehrtman et al., 2023). Career counseling programs in K-12 schools include helping students develop sound decision-making skills and aligning their academic courses with potential career interests. Career readiness begins in elementary school and continues through high school by way of appropriate developmental activities (Ocherman et al., 2023). Elementary school counselors introduce students to the concept of careers, helping them explore different career paths and find areas of interest. They organize career fairs, guest speakers, and classroom activities to foster career awareness. Middle school counselors continue to guide students in their career exploration, helping them consider their interests, skills, and values. The high school counselors help students explore career options and develop action plans to achieve their goals. They assist with job shadowing, internships, and college visits to help students make informed decisions about their future careers.

School counselors are trained in crisis intervention and respond to emergencies and crises in their schools to ensure the safety and well-being of students and staff (ASCA, 2019). In the past decade, there has been an increase in school shootings, and school counselors are critical in providing support in the aftermath of these situations, leaning on school protocols and guidance for ASCA (Marbley et al., 2021). Finally, there are concerns about the school climate and bullying prevention by collaborating with

school stakeholders (parents, teachers, administration, community) to implement school-wide initiatives.

Ruiz et al. (2018) investigated the perceptions of school principals and counselors regarding the role of a counselor in an educational environment. The findings indicated a consensus between principals and counselors regarding counselors' responsibilities, which include conducting counseling sessions, providing guidance to school personnel, parents, and administrators, and organizing special events and programs. Nevertheless, they held differing opinions regarding specific tasks, such as allocating students to classes, carrying out responsibilities in the hall, bus, or cafeteria, and managing the standardized testing program. Subsequent investigations could further examine these discrepancies, potentially resulting in a more cohesive understanding of a school counselor's role in the school post-pandemic. Furthermore, the study's results may yield information that would better help bridge the gap in beneficial school counselor duties that align with ASCA and support the school environment.

Additionally, school counselors collaborate closely with parents, instructors, and students to determine academic strengths and growth areas. They also assist students with goal setting, problem solving, and educational counseling (ASCA, 2019b). They are adept at offering pupils emotional support and helping them overcome obstacles like bullying, family problems, and peer relationships. Furthermore, school counselors support good mental health by providing counseling services when necessary and teaching coping mechanisms (ASCA, 2019). Though ASCA (2019b) outlined the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, school principals may have their list of duties

outside of the functions outlined by ASCA (Geese et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2022; Ruiz et al., 2018). School counselors spend significant time on administrative tasks rather than counseling responsibilities (Ruiz et al., 2018). According to Ruiz et al. (2018), the most common administrative tasks encompass soliciting and obtaining documents, arranging appointments, managing permanent records, admitting students, referring and placing students in special education programs, maintaining records, organizing paperwork, and processing student withdrawals. Other examples include running MTSS, administering SAT exams, managing 504 plans, and supporting special education with assessments. Ruiz et al. (2018) suggest that the assignment of non-counseling duties is due to a lack of understanding by the principals of the school counselor role, along with a need for administrative support. The various duties, many of which clash with one another, could cause school counselors to experience role conflict (Blake, 2022). Role conflict is "the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person" (Biddle, 1986, p. 82, as cited by Blake, 2022).

Lewis et al. (2020) examined principals' perceptions of the role of school counselors and found they align with those of school counselors. The author further acknowledged that principals sometimes misuse school counselors, showing the need for a greater understanding of the role of school counselors (Lewis et al., 2020). Principal preparation programs could support the knowledge of effectively utilizing school counselors during training. Researchers emphasize role understanding and collaboration between principals and school counselors to enhance students' development (Geese et al., 2020; Gonzales et al., 2022). Geese et al. (2020) identified the need for collaboration

between school counselors and principals and proposed a framework for collaboration through preservice and services (Geese et al., 2020). At the same time, Gonzales et al. (2022) research study assessed aspiring school counselors' and principals' knowledge of their professional counterparts' roles. Gonzales et al. further examined the perception of school counselors and principals' reception of receiving an intervention to support collaboration. The study participants appreciated the experience and the chance to collaborate (Gonzales et al., 2022). Principals and school counselors' more significant understanding of each other's roles can directly impact the hiring process.

The expectations of multiple stakeholders, including parents, administrators, and students, vary, exacerbating role conflict (Blake, 2022). This expectation variability can lead to role ambiguity and confusion for school counselors responsible for supporting students' academic success and addressing their academic, post-secondary readiness, and social-emotional needs (Blake, 2022). Furthermore, an ongoing debate exists about whether school counseling should have an educational or psychological focus, highlighting the complexities of the school counselor's role and the need for a comprehensive approach (Kolbert et al., 2016). However, the roles and responsibilities of school counselors are unique to both the counseling and education professions. Therefore, traits that were essential in the past, such as teaching, are no longer necessary and have been replaced by a focus on mental health and overall student success (Mulhern, 2020).

Professional Identity of School Counselors

School counselors are crucial in supporting mental health, building strong relationships, and assisting students in acquiring critical life skills. As defined by Mulhern (2020) and ASCA (2019b), school counselors are responsible for providing counseling services and identifying and removing obstacles to learning so students can reach their full potential. However, the professional identity of school counselors has often been a subject of debate within the education community. Historically, the professional identity of school counselors was identified as educators rather than mental health professionals (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021). This perspective is traced back to the early 20th century, when school counselors were primarily responsible for providing academic guidance, career development, and counseling services within schools (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021). However, as the role of school counselors evolved, they began to take on additional responsibilities, such as mental health support and crisis intervention (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021; Lambie et al., 2019).

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of school counselors as mental health professionals and educators (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021; Lambie et al., 2019). Goodman-Scott et al. (2021) argued that school counselors possess a unique combination of knowledge and skills to address students' academic and mental health needs effectively. Scholars believe that identifying school counselors as educators alone does not fully capture the complexity of their work and its significance in promoting student well-being and academic success (Goodman-Scot et al., 2021; Lambie et al., 2019; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). Similarly, Levy and Lemberger-

Truelove (2021) proposed that school counselors' professional identity is that of mental health professionals and educators. Furthermore, Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) argued that removing the ambiguity surrounding school counselors' professional identity can help clarify their role within schools and ensure they are appropriately supported and resourced. By incorporating mental health into their professional identity, school counselors can communicate their scope of practice more effectively and advocate for the necessary support and resources for students. Zyromski et al. (2019) discussed that the volatility of school counselors' professional designations has consequences for developing a robust professional identity. The ASCA National Model (2019) acknowledges the changing professional identities of school counselors, who are now identified as both educators and mental health professionals (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). While both perspectives offer valuable insights into the nature of school counselors' professional identity, it is essential to acknowledge their diverse roles and responsibilities. They possess a unique skill set that combines counseling expertise with a deep understanding of the educational landscape. Ultimately, the most appropriate and professional identity for school counselors accurately reflects their multifaceted role in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional well-being.

Events such as school shootings and the COVID-19 pandemic are growing mental health concerns of today and continue to impact the education of youth (Mann et al., 2019). According to Lambie et al. (2019), the central component of school counseling practice supports the focus on the non-cognitive aspects of healthy student development and the need for school counselors to reclaim mental health as a central component of

school counseling practice (Lambie et al. 2019). ASCA board members have not agreed on identifying school counselors as educator-focused over counselors-focused, with many members not having prior teaching experience. Without consensus within the professional organization governing (ASCA) the school counseling profession, administrators' perception of the identity of a professional school counselor can influence their thinking process on the need for previous teaching experience.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs

Along with the ASCA (2016) model for school counseling, CACREP (2024) provided educational guides that ensure school counselors' preparation for their role within the school setting. CACREP (2024) is an accreditation program for counseling education programs that advance the counseling profession by creating standards to ensure excellence in counseling educational programs across the United States. These organizations, ASCA and CACREP, play a crucial role in shaping the preparation and standards for school counselors, providing a solid foundation for their professional development and ensuring their effectiveness within the school setting (ASCA, 2019; CACREP, 2024). Counselor educators in CACREP-approved programs follow the educational guides in teaching and training professional school counseling candidates, and the CACREP standards are evaluated and updated to incorporate changes in the school system that affect the functions of the school counselor.

The demand for school counselors is growing, and so is the level of rigor associated with their preparation (Akos & Duquette, 2022). The 2024 CACREP preparation standards put more pressure on school counselor preparation programs by

requiring documentation of the skills students should be able to perform (Akos & Duquette, 2022). School counselors are required to have a master's level degree (ASCA, 2019). Counseling programs accredited by CACREP (2024) must complete a minimum of 100-hour supervised practicum and 600 hours of internship. The purpose of practicum and internship is to provide school counselors with experience working with students in a school environment (CACREP, 2024). Supervisors can support school counselors during practicum and internship as they conduct classroom guidance lessons and facilitate activities such as parenting workshops, school assemblies, and career and college fairs. These activities help school counselors in training gain the limited teaching experience needed when working in the K-12 school environment. CACREP reflects preparation standards based on education reforms and societal changes, which are revisited and revised every seven years in response to societal shifts (Akos & Duquette, 2022). The COVID pandemic led to a significant shift in the way students receive mental health services. Updates in the training programs may need to incorporate telehealth training for school counselors.

Current State Requirements for School Counselors

The requirements and experience to become a school counselor K-12 vary significantly from state to state (Department of Education, 2023). For instance, to become a school counselor in Missouri, the candidate must have a master's degree in a state-approved counseling program with 300 hours of internship and a bachelor's degree in education from a state-approved teacher preparation program. If the candidate does not have an approved bachelor's degree, they must take specific teacher curriculum courses

to receive an educator certificate in school counseling (Missouri Department of Education, 2023). Alabama requires completing an approved counseling program, passing the praxis, a school-based internship, and 2 full years of professional educational work experience (ASCA, 2023).

Though states have removed the requirement for school counselors to have a formal teaching background, there are distinct differences. There are notable differences between teachers and non-teachers for certification as school counselors. States that make these distinctions are Alaska, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio (teachers with current Ohio teaching licenses can obtain a temporary school counselor license), Oregon, Tennessee, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (ASCA, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). For example, school counseling candidates without a teaching license must complete a one-year internship in Mississippi and Wisconsin (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). In Ohio, teachers must only complete eight courses to become school counselors, and they do not need to attend a counseling program (ASCA, 2023). Currently, 44 U.S. states require a master's degree in school counseling, mental health counseling, or higher for school counselor certification (ASCA, 2021). ASCA (2021) acknowledges that 37 states require school counselors to get a passing score on exams, such as School Counseling Praxis, the National Counseling Exam, or any state-level certification exam. The states that do not require a set examination are Arizona, Alaska, Connecticut, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, North Dakota, Virginia,

and Wisconsin (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Five states have special requirements for school counselors (see Table 1).

Table 1

States With Special Requirements for School Counselors

State	Requirement
Colorado	Special services license
Maine	Teaching exceptional students in regular classroom
Georgia	Special education coursework
Indiana	CPR and suicide training
South Dakota	1 hour suicide awareness and prevention training

States may vary in their experience requirements (i.e., practicum, internship, pre-graduation hands-on experience), but most states require experience to work as a school counselor; however, Alaska does. Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Maine, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Carolina do not require internship or work experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Furthermore, some states do not require work experience for school counselors if they are licensed teachers (ASCA, 2023). These differences could infer that teaching experience is still vital for school counselors. Though states do not request teaching experience as a hiring requirement for school counselors, the guidelines in other states indirectly present barriers to school counselors without a teaching background. The question is how these policies affect school principals' perceptions during interviews and hiring.

Teachers' Perceptions

There is limited research on teachers' perception of the effectiveness of school counselors who were not a prior teacher (Bigman et al., 2021). A study conducted by

Villares (2021) examined teachers' perceptions of school counselors' impact on students. The survey of 175 fifth-grade teachers indicated collaboration improved teachers' perceptions of school counselors in delivering student success skills lessons (Villares et al., 2021). Before the study by Bigman et al. (2021), there was a significant gap in research exploring teachers' perceptions of school counselors. Although teachers, administrators, and parents support school counselors and counseling programs, many would benefit from education and clarification on school counseling roles. Understanding teachers' perceptions could help school counselors connect with teachers who are key school stakeholders.

Principals and Hiring School Counselors

Some studies identify principals as the primary hiring authority for school counselors (Gonzale et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021; O'Hara & Probst, 2016). Principals also evaluate the school counselor's performance (Mayes et al., 2020). For school counselors, it is vital to understand how principals perceive school counselor hiring selection. Despite extensive studies in the field of school counselors, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the principal's decision-making process when selecting school counselors and evaluating applicants. In an exhaustive literature search, I only found three articles that directly address hiring school counselors. Beale (1995) examined principals' perspectives in selecting school counselors. The research indicated that 90% of the participants believed the interview, character references, and supervised internship outcomes were important in the selection (Beale, 1995). The study findings indicated that school counselors' academic backgrounds had a minimal impact on

selection decisions. Furthermore, Beale found that 50% of principals considered teaching experience necessary when hiring school counselors (Beale, 1995). Additionally, 55% of the participants acknowledged being willing to hire counselors without a teaching background, especially high school principals (Beale, 1995).

However, Beal's (1995) study may not reflect more recent shifts in perceptions and societal changes. In contrast, McGlothlin and Miller (2008) shared supportive guidelines for interviewing principals in the hiring process, including the importance of the school counselor's educational background. The authors suggested basing interview questions on characteristics identified by ASCA (2006) of an effective school counselor. The interview areas noted are educational backgrounds, technological competencies, professional identities, counseling skills, and personal characteristics (McGlothlin & Miller, 2008). Additionally, McGlothlin and Miller (2008) discussed establishing an open line of communication between the principals and the school counselor during the interview process. The authors shared that the conversation could assist in choosing school counselors who align with and support the objectives of schools and their administration.

In congruence with McGlothlin and Miller's (2008) guidelines for supporting principals' efforts to hire effective school counselors for their organization, O'Hara and Probst (2016) recommend using a group rather than individual hiring approach for competency-based hiring. O'Hara and Probst emphasized that selecting the most suitable candidates for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers can be difficult for school administrators due to their lack of understanding of their roles and functions. They

also highlight that those in the hiring process bring their own conscious and unconscious biases into the hiring process. The competency-based approach focuses on interview questions based on the applicant's skills, knowledge, and traits specific to the school counselor's role and functions (O'Hara & Probst, 2016).

The ASCA framework for comprehensive school counseling offers insight to help school administrators better understand the specific training and skills needed to be effective school counselors (ASCA 2019; Mayes et al., 2021). However, Ruiz et al. (2018) showed that principals experience the duties of professional school counselors based on the duties assigned by the former administrators. Ruiz et al. further suggested discrepancies between principals and counselors regarding professional school counselors' appropriate and inappropriate roles and functions. Researchers have identified the need for collaboration and training for school principals to understand a school counselor's role and activities (ASCA, 2019b; Tygret et al., 2020; Yavuz et al., 2017). The training would support the understanding of school principals about the role of school counselors, which could remove role conflict and role ambiguity that school counselors experience (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021; Ruiz et al., 2018). School principals and counselors are crucial in ensuring students' well-being and academic success. These two professionals' relationships can significantly impact students' mental health, academic progress, and overall school climate (Geese et al., 2020). Effective communication is essential for any successful relationship; the principal and school counselor are no exception.

However, understanding the role of school counselors is vital to ensure effective collaboration and support for all students (Ruiz et al., 2018). Through collaboration and communication, they can work together to address student needs, such as academic support, social and emotional challenges, and overall well-being (Geese et al., 2020). With an understanding of the school counselor's role and function, principals can select candidates that will be effective in their schools.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I addressed the changes in the school counseling profession and the professional movement that affects the role and functions of school counselors. The professional identity of school counselors hinges upon the counseling foundation and the role they provide for students. Professional identity confusion leads to questions about the hiring practices of school principals and the criteria used in hiring selection. School counseling has expanded over recent decades to provide holistic support for all students' development (Lambie & Williamson, 2008; Lawrence & Stone, 2019; Levy et al., 2021). Hiring practices may also need to be revised, as administrators may need to be better educated about the role and training school counselors receive to support hiring effective school counselors.

Lambie and Williamson (2008) suggested that with the focus of school counselors on supporting the development of all students, the background of teaching experience is not as specific to the professional identity of school counselors as it was in the past. Current state requirements for professional school counselors, historical policies for teaching experience, and the ambiguity of the role of school counselors may present

barriers in the hiring process. Finally, the literature highlighted the implications for school counselors' training associated with CACREP educational guides that ensure their preparation for their role in K-12 schools. In-depth preparation of school counselors through quality training programs is essential when hiring school counselors (CACREP, 2024).

In Chapter 3, I discuss how the principles of hermeneutics phenomenology were used in this study to explore the lived experiences of school principals who have hired teachers without a teaching background. Further discussion will share the study's design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and details regarding participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis. I will also discuss issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations supporting the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Hermeneutic phenomenology theory allows a researcher and participants to engage in a way that helped me to understand the lived experiences of K-12 principals who have hired professional school counselors. Applying Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy, informed by Gadamer's hermeneutics, fit the aims of my study. This provided a framework for exploring school principals' perceptions when hiring school counselors. I sought to gain a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences and interpret their responses through the lens of their opinions and assumptions to obtain a thorough knowledge of the phenomenon. In this chapter, I present the research method design and the connection between the research questions and the target population. In addition, I explain the data collection instrument, sampling procedures, and participants' recruitment process. Finally, I discuss the ethical guidelines and trustworthiness of the research.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question guiding this qualitative study was:

What are the perceptions of principals interviewing and hiring professional school counselors in U.S. K-12 public schools?

As a qualitative tradition, phenomenology is a recognized and commonly used practice (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective that helps researchers explore and understand everyday experiences without presupposing knowledge (People, 2021). Phenomenology methodology is a robust research strategy

well suited for studying the lived experiences of school principals when hiring professional school counselors. I sought to gain a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of school principals and interpret their responses through their perspectives (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

I used the hermeneutic phenomenology framework to explore the subjective experiences, from their perceptions, interpretations, and meaning through individual interviews. Hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology are distinct methodologies employed for comprehending the nature of human experience (Peoples, 2021). Although both aim to elucidate conscious perceptions' fundamental significance and frameworks, they use different approaches and philosophical presumptions (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Peoples, 2021). One of the main differences between the two methods is their methodological approaches. Edmund Husserl's development of transcendental phenomenology highlights the importance of obtaining a direct and impartial understanding of the fundamental nature of consciousness (Creely, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology is rooted in objective reality and the separation of subject and object. For the present study, I used the hermeneutic phenomenology.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, formulated by Martin Heidegger, emphasizes the subjective and situated nature of human experience without suspending judgments of experiences because experiences do not hinder the research (Peoples, 2021). Heidegger, the founder of hermeneutic phenomenology, introduced the concept of the hermeneutic circle, which encompasses the interconnected nature of understanding and interpretation (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Gadamer, a student of

Heidegger, further developed the hermeneutic circle (Koch, 1996). Gadamer emphasized the importance of understanding the participants' experiences and viewpoints. The fusion of horizons and the hermeneutic circle are essential concepts in hermeneutic philosophy (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This process involves understanding individual parts of a text, connecting them to the broader context, and analyzing the pieces to the whole. Gadamer placed significant emphasis on interpretation and creating meaning (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). The subject matter of this study is personal comprehension and cultural analysis of human encounters.

Hermeneutic phenomenology theory allows the researcher and participants to engage in a way that will help the researcher understand participants' lived experiences (People, 2021). Specifically, the hermeneutic circle stresses the importance of understanding the participants' experiences and viewpoints (Beck, 2019). As a researcher using the hermeneutic circle approach, I gained a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences and interpreted their responses through the lens of their perceptions to obtain a thorough knowledge of a phenomenon (Beck, 2019). Accordingly, Heidegger considered the researcher a valid component of the research process, existing as a participant within the world of being (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009).

Qualitative research is commonly used in the humanities and social sciences in subjects such as anthropology, sociology, and education (Burkholder et al., 2020). This type of research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Typical approaches used in qualitative research are grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, phenomenology, and case study (Burkholder et

al., 2020). As a qualitative tradition, phenomenology is a recognized and commonly used tradition (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective that helps researchers explore and understand everyday experiences without presupposing knowledge.

When comparing the five methods, qualitative phenomenology stands out for its focus on individuals sharing a common experience and its ability to generate rich and detailed descriptions of the lived world (Dibley et al., 2020). Conversely, ethnography provides a broader understanding of the social and cultural context in which participants reside. It explores cultural practices, rituals, and social interaction (Burkholder et al., 2020). Meanwhile, narrative and case studies focus on individual narratives or personal stories and experiences (Piper et al., 2021). Finally, ground theory offers different approaches to developing theories and understanding patterns (Burkholder et al., 2020).

For this study, I sought a deep and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of participants who share a common experience and gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions. Van Manen (2014) explained, “Phenomenology is a way of accessing the world as we experience it pre-reflectively. Pre-reflective experience is the ordinary experience that we live in and that we live through for most, if not all, of our day-to-day existence” (p. 28). Furthermore, using the hermeneutic circle, I acknowledged my prejudgments and biases before I analyzed the data. Gadmar underlined the significance of interpretation and comprehending subjective meaning within context, particularly regarding texts and human experiences (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

As a school counselor who did not work as a teacher before being hired, I needed to be aware of my own bias and forethought and the influence it may have imposed on this research (see Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Hermeneutics also provides a flexible and iterative study methodology. Novice researchers like me can continually review data; this allowed me to expand my understanding and embrace new insights through the iterative process.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role in hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on studying subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings. It involves the researcher actively engaging with participants to understand their lived experiences and make sense of their perspectives (Neubauer et al., 2019). The researcher is crucial in guiding the research process and interpreting findings. I created a safe and nonjudgmental space for the participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and opinions freely. In hermeneutic phenomenology research, the researcher is an active participant. Their active participation allows the researcher to better understand the participants' experiences and contribute to their reflection.

Furthermore, alongside conducting interviews, the researcher may observe the participants in their authentic surroundings or actively participate in activities relevant to the research subject to better comprehend the phenomena (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher thoroughly comprehended the participants' experiences by integrating interviews and observations. The researcher's role is to ask questions and provoke participant reflection (McGrath et al., 2019). The researcher may

use open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences and probe deeper into specific areas of interest (Philipps & Mrowczynski, 2021). By asking questions that prompt reflection, the researcher can help participants delve deeper into their experiences and uncover new insights. The researcher's responsibility is to diligently observe and analyze the participants' verbal and nonverbal expressions, as these can offer valuable insights into their subjective experiences (Burkholder et al., 2020). Throughout the research process, the researcher documents and analyzes participants' responses, which includes taking notes during interviews or observations or transcribing audio recordings (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The researcher then organizes and interprets the data, looking for patterns and themes that emerge from the participants' experiences.

The researcher's role also includes conducting an interpretative analysis of the data. The researcher analyzes data by making sense of the collected data and interpreting it within a larger theoretical framework (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher considers the participants' perspectives, contextual factors, and existing literature to provide a deeper meaning and understanding of the participants' experiences (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As a responsible researcher, I adhered to ethical standards and protocols. Ethical standards and protocols involve obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring that participants are not harmed or exploited during the research process (Burkholder et al., 2020). The researcher also ensures that the research advances knowledge and benefits society.

Methodology

The methodology section of a qualitative research study, such as the hermeneutic phenomenology research study, offers a comprehensive description of the research's design and the characteristics of the population in the study. The methods include procedures for collecting data, techniques for analyzing data, and ethical considerations.

Participant Selection Logic

When conducting research studies, it is essential to establish specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for the population the researcher is investigating (Burkholder et al., 2020). These criteria serve two primary purposes: to ensure the consistency and reliability of the study and to identify participants who possess the characteristics necessary to address the research question effectively (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By outlining the requirements for participating in the research study, researchers can ensure that all participants are well-suited to contribute to the study's objectives.

In this section, I address the study's population and shared the selection criteria. Other elements of the methodology will include discussing the sampling strategy that supports the study's nature and purpose. In addition, I explain the logic behind determining sample size and the recruitment strategies to identify, contact, and recruit participants for this study.

Population

The selection of the study population was critical to answering the research question. The study sought to understand school principals' perceptions of hiring and working with school counselors. The participants were selected based on the criteria

identified, allowing me to answer the research question thoroughly. The population of the study was public school principals. The participants could work at any grade level, K-12. Principals needed to have at least 5 years in their role, have hired a school counselor, and worked with the school counselors for at least 2 years.

Sampling Strategy

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to select participants who represent the criteria set forth for the study. Purposeful sampling is also called judgmental sampling (Babbie, 2017), and this sampling technique depends on a researcher's discernment in identifying and choosing the individuals who can offer the most pertinent information to accomplish the study's objectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Purposive sampling is most effective when the objective is to concentrate extensively on a small sample. Purposive sampling aims to identify participants deliberately selected based on a specific experience with the researched phenomenon to address the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Purposeful sampling allowed the selection of participants who could provide information-rich data to support the researcher reaching the data saturation point (Mason, 2010; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this hermeneutic phenomenological study, purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of school principals from different demographics who work in public K-12 schools and hire school counselors.

Along with purposive sampling, I incorporated snowball sampling. The concept of snowball sampling is a method of participant recruitment in research studies. Snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling, involves participants sharing information about the study with other individuals who they believe meet the

predetermined criteria (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). This method is commonly used and has gained popularity among researchers due to its convenience and potential reach. Participants referred by others are often more willing to participate as they are familiar with the study and its objectives.

Sample Size and Saturation

A phenomenological study's sample size can be smaller than other qualitative research methodologies because higher numbers tend not to produce more knowledge and insight into the study's phenomena (Burkholder et al., 2016). The recommended participant sample size in phenomenology ranges from three to 10 participants (Mason, 2010). The samples are purposively selected to provide richly textured information relevant to the phenomenon investigated (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Several factors support the sample size in qualitative research studies, such as the research question, the study's purpose, and the nature of the study (Patton, 2015). Hence, a smaller sample size can attain saturation when the researcher finds no new data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In addition, snowball sampling allows potential participants to support reaching saturation. Data saturation is when a researcher no longer knows information from their participants (Burkholder et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). Based on the research and nature of the study, I recruited eight participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of school principals who hire school counselors.

Criteria

In this study, the inclusion criteria for participants included principals from public schools in the United States. Principals' school level was not specific to selection. The

participants were from elementary, middle, and high schools. The principals had at least 5 years or more experience as a school principal at any school level. Principals had hired a school counselor for their school and worked with the school counselors for at least 2 years. I chose not to impose any gender or age requirement on participants. Exclusion criteria for participants included principals in private and charter schools, as the hiring standards for staffing could differ from those in public schools. I also excluded principals with less than 5 years of experience as a school principal. By establishing these inclusion and exclusion criteria, I ensured that only principals who met the specified criteria participated in the study, thus providing a homogeneous sample relevant to the research question.

Recruitment

Purposive sampling and snowball techniques were used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling was applied by asking participants to refer to others who fit the criteria for the study. In addition, I asked local school districts to display flyers at their district offices and used social media (Facebook and Instagram) to reach participants out of state. Once candidates responded, I sent them an invitation and an informed consent form. The correspondence took place through email. After completing the documentation, I scheduled a time to conduct the interview.

Instrumentation

Multiple data collection methods can be employed to gather data for the hermeneutic phenomenology research study (Burkholder et al., 2020). These methods included interviews, focus groups, observations, field notes, and journaling (Burkholder

et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl. 2016). Rubin and Rubin (2012) explain the four categories of qualitative data collection: focus groups, internet interviews, casual conversation, in-passing clarification, and semistructured and unstructured interviewing. Each of these methods can provide significant, detailed data on the lived experience of phenomena (Burkholder et al., 2020). For this study, I used individual semistructured interviews as my primary data collection method to investigate the principal's experiences hiring school counselors. According to Burkholder (2020), interviews are the primary data collection method associated with qualitative research methods. To that extent, Peoples (2021) explains that interviews are the recommended method of data collection when conducting a phenomenological study. Often, researchers use semistructured interview techniques when they have a specific topic (Phillipps & Mrowczynski. 2021). Another characteristic of the semistructured interview is that the researcher develops a protocol with specific questions and steers the interview. The primary benefit of interviews is that they provide a comprehensive description and analysis of a research topic without restricting the scope of the study or the participant response (Phillippi & Mrowczynski, 2021). When interviewing participants, the researcher can probe for clarity to ensure a clear understanding of responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Based on my research topic and the population involved, using interviews helped illuminate the perception of principals' decision-making process when hiring school counselors. When conducting interviews, the researcher can observe the conduct of the participants to gain insights into their behaviors, interactions, and environments (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Along with using interviews and observation, I employed journaling as a

method of reflexivity for myself, the researcher. In hermeneutic phenomenological study, journaling provides an outlet to document my experiences while accounting for positionality concerns (Peoples, 2021). The hermeneutic circle is a tool to transcend our biases and become more aware of our forethoughts and attitudes that shape our thoughts (Gadamer, 2004). Using the hermeneutic circle, the researcher can engage in a continuous cycle of understanding and self-reflection, allowing for change and growth (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). As a school counselor, I believe the hermeneutic circle was invaluable in staying open to current ideas and perspectives.

I constructed an interview protocol that was reviewed and accepted by the IRB before starting the interview process. The interview protocol ensured consistency throughout the process (Burkholder et al., 2020). The interview questions were developed based on literature on the phenomenon related to the research question. To vet the research instrument, a school principal, K-5, and a schoolteacher, K-8, were interviewed with the instrument to obtain feedback on the content. I also had a colleague who has no affiliation with school counseling, and the K-12 education system provided input. Vetting the research instrument added to its validity ensures that the items measure what is intended by the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your ethnicity and race?
4. How long have you worked as a school principal/administrator?

5. What state do you work in as a school principal/administrator?
6. Are you an elementary, middle, or high school principal/administrator?
7. Have you hired a school counselor?

Interview Questions

1. In what ways, if any, did your professional training program prepare you to hire and evaluate the school counselor role?
2. What characteristics or skills of a school counseling candidate do you look for when hiring?
3. How important is the educational program the school counselor attended in your decision when evaluating a school counseling candidate for hire?
4. What qualifications of a school counseling candidate for hire are most important?
5. What are your beliefs and perceptions about the role and function of school counselors you hire?
6. Describe any challenges you have experienced recruiting and hiring candidates you believe are most qualified for your school?
7. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted recruiting and hiring school counseling candidates for your school?
8. What recommendations would you give K-12 school principals for recruiting and hiring the best school counseling candidate for the role in their schools?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Data Analysis Plan

Analyzing data in a phenomenological study is emergent, meaning that data will emerge and change as the analysis occurs (Peoples, 2021). Data analysis for this study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a versatile approach that researchers can customize to suit various types of research. Thematic analysis is an effective research methodology that extracts insights into individuals' perspectives, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from qualitative data sets, such as interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is frequently subjective and dependent on the researcher's discernment, necessitating careful contemplation of one's choices and interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis offers considerable flexibility in interpreting data and facilitates handling large data sets by categorizing them into overarching themes.

The first step in the analysis was becoming familiar with the data, where the researcher gets a thorough overview of the collected data before analyzing individual items. This step involved transcribing audio, reading the text, and taking initial notes. I used the voice recording App on my phone to record the audio of the participants' interviews, which took place through the Zoom platform. Then, the audio-recording was transcribed verbatim. During this step, unnecessary fillers, such as *um* or *you know*, were removed. Step two begins systematically creating codes across the data set and organizing the data by codes; this involves coding, highlighting text sections—usually phrases or sentences—and creating shorthand labels or codes to describe the content. I completed the code by hand without the use of software.

Step three involved grouping codes into themes by identifying patterns among codes and developing themes. This process involved carefully reviewing the coded data and searching for recurring words, phrases, or concepts, paying close attention to any similarities or differences within the data. As I carefully examined the patterns and connections, I identified the underlying themes that emerged from the data. I reviewed and confirmed the themes and codes in step four to create a thematic map. The researcher ensures that the themes identified are valuable and accurate data representations (Braun & Clark, 2006). Step five is where I named and defined themes. Naming and defining themes involved formulating precisely what each theme meant and how it helped me understand the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Naming themes consists of creating an understandable name for each theme. In the final step, six, I confirmed the findings and wrote the results using a narrative passage that provided detailed descriptions of the data and the emerging uncovered themes. I also used an inductive approach to analysis to identify underlying meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clark (2006), inductive research, derived from researchers' observations, develops theory by building broader themes from participants' views. Following these steps supports the replication of this study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research is an essential component that researchers must consider when conducting their studies (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It involves establishing the credibility of the findings, demonstrating dependability and confirmability, and ensuring transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Shenton, 2004). These strategies help

establish the integrity of the research findings and increase their credibility in the eyes of both researchers and stakeholders (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

The concept of credibility in qualitative research is what internal validity is to a quantitative project (Daniel, 2018; Shenton, 2004). The researcher establishes credibility, ensuring the data is credible, relevant, and congruent (Daniel, 2018). The three techniques used to ensure credibility in this study were reflexive journaling, member check, and peer review. In hermeneutic phenomenological study, journaling provides an outlet to document my experiences while accounting for positionality concerns (Peoples, 2021). Member check is a technique in hermeneutic phenomenology that allows participants to review the research findings and interpretations. By involving the participants in this process, I gained feedback and ensured that the research findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences. Ensuring the findings reflect what the participants shared allows a researcher to validate their conclusions (Daniel, 2018). In this study, the participants had the opportunity to review the final summary. Only one participant reviewed the findings and felt they were accurate. Lastly, peer review enhanced the research's credibility, and I sought peer support for this study from a fellow student in the Walden dissertation phase. Peoples (2021) explained that reviews by a dissertation committee alone may not be sufficient to establish validity (Peoples, 2021).

Confirmability

K kept field notes and memos to confirm this study's accuracy. I maintained an audit trail of documents associated with the research process. The record-keeping process

is termed the "audit trail" (Daniel, 2018, p. 3). The audit trail included recording research decisions, data collection procedures, and any modifications made to the data during analysis (Shenton, 2004). An audit trail provided transparency in the research process and helped demonstrate the findings' validity. I established and validated the study's research instruments and explained and discussed how this was accomplished.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of findings over time or across researchers (Daniel, 2018). Establishing dependability includes adhering to standard research practices and reporting procedures (Shenton, 2004). To replicate the study's findings, a researcher must document all data collection procedures to ensure others can replicate the research. This study's adherence to ethical guidelines ensured that the research was conducted with integrity, thus establishing dependability (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

The concept of transferability in qualitative research is consistent with the concept of reliability in quantitative analysis (Daniel, 2018; Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe in achieving transferability by a researcher providing explicit details about the context of the study and sufficient information so others can compare whether the research is like other settings. The details of the study should provide "rich," "thick," and "dense" description details regarding the participants and the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). In the current study, I shared an in-depth, clearly defined

description of the target population to support transferability, including identifying characteristics.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical standards include obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and avoiding potential conflicts of interest. A collection of moral principles, regulations, or standards regulating a person or profession defines ethical behavior (Feldman & Shaw, 2019). Ethical standards play a crucial role in ensuring the responsible conduct of research. As a student at Walden University, I sought approval for my research through Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To obtain authorization, I presented my research proposal. The IRB standards encompass a set of moral principles, regulations, or standards that govern the behavior of researchers and guide their actions. Approval from Walden University's IRB ensured my research adherence to ethical standards, ensuring the ethical treatment of participants, maintaining participant confidentiality, and mitigating potential conflicts of interest.

Informed Consent

One of the critical ethical standards in research is obtaining informed consent. Informed consent involves providing potential participants with relevant information about a study, allowing them to make informed decisions about their participation. Feldman and Shaw (2019) emphasized the importance of informed consent, explaining that it ensures participants' autonomy and safeguards their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Once participants inquired and were informed of their interest in participating in the study, I sent them an invitation and an informed consent form. I

provided detailed information on the study's purpose and process in the invitation and addressed any concerns of the participants. The informed consent form followed the requirements of Walden University. Before beginning the interviews, I reviewed the consent form with each participant. By obtaining informed consent, I ensured that each participant's decision was made to be involved in the study.

Confidentiality

In addition to informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality is another vital ethical consideration. Researchers must respect participants' privacy and ensure that personal identifying information remains confidential. Feldman and Shaw (2019) emphasize the significance of protecting participant confidentiality, stating that it is essential for maintaining the trust and respect of the participants. I implemented the following measures to safeguard participants' privacy: using pseudonyms, secure data storage, and limited access to data. I provided the participants in this research study with pseudonyms to protect their identities. The pseudonyms I used were labeling the participants by numbers beginning with the number one. For example, P1 was used to identify the first participant and continue through P8. I used the voice recording App on my phone to record the audio of the participants' interviews, which took place through the Zoom platform. Then, I manually hand-transcribed the audio-recording. I am maintaining the participants' information on my computer, which is passcode protected. I will follow Walden University's guidelines on archiving and destroying confidential information. By the IRB guidelines, I will maintain and safely keep the data for 5 years and adhere to a specific protocol for destroying the archival data.

Conflict of Interest

Feldman and Shaw (2019) emphasized the importance of addressing conflicts of research interest. These conflicts can undermine the integrity of the research process and compromise participants' trust in the researcher. I mitigated potential conflicts for this study by not recruiting participants I had previously worked with. Based on my positive work assessments, I believe that would be a professional conflict of interest. Mitigating potential conflict was also addressed by supportive treatment of participants. When conducting research, there are always ethical considerations about the treatment of the participants during the process (Burkholder et al., 2020). One way to address this concern is by allowing participants' input. In this study I provided the participants with a copy of the dictated interview. By providing these documents, I enabled participants to review the interview and make any changes or suggestions before finalizing it. By allowing participants to review their responses, I accurately represented participants' perspectives. Only one participant reviewed and responded to this process. The participant determined that the document was accurate. I also offered individual debriefing sessions through the Zoom Platform to address any concerns of the participants upon completing the study. This session would allow participants to ask questions, provide feedback, and discuss any thoughts or feelings they had during the research process. However, none of the participants were interested in attending the debriefing session.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an in-depth review of the research design and rationale, including the role of the researcher. The research study sought to understand participants'

subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings using hermeneutic phenomenology, a distinct methodology employed for comprehending the nature of human experience (Peoples, 2021). I selected hermeneutic phenomenology because it allowed for a deep exploration of individuals' perceptions, interpretations, and meanings of their experiences. I discussed the selection of participants who had undergone specific experiences or held relevant knowledge regarding the research topic. For this study, school principals had experience hiring school counselors. My role as a researcher was to study subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings, conducting interviews and analyzing data. The methodology involved a structured interview guide (Burkholder et al., 2020), participant selection, data collection and analysis, and triangulation of data sources.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. I explained the multiple data sources used to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings. These included my observations during the interviews, field notes, and supporting documents provided by the participants. Ethical standards in research encompassed several vital principles. Obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and avoiding potential conflicts of interest were crucial ethical considerations for researchers. By adhering to the strategies, processes, and standards of each element of the research, I established the research findings' integrity and increased credibility for future research (Shenton, 2004).

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

School principals are the primary hiring authorities in U.S. K-12 public schools when employing school counselors (Gonzales et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021; Ruiz et al., 2018). School counseling, like all roles within education, is constantly evolving to meet the needs of an ever-changing society. School counselors can contribute to students' growth, development, and advancement in their educational achievement (Donohue et al., 2022; Lawrence & Stone, 2019). Exploring the hiring experiences of school principals who interview and employ school counselors is essential to understanding what they look for in successful candidates and how they perceive their roles in their schools. The availability of more qualified school counselors may lead to more significant opportunities to improve students' academic achievement, careers, and social-emotional development (Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2022; Lambie et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to understand the perceptions of school principals when hiring school counselors to serve the needs of their students, parents, and community stakeholders in U.S. K-12 public schools. Exploring school principals' hiring experiences may shed some light on what characteristics they look for and how they make decisions around the candidates they ultimately hire. I investigated school principals' perceptions of their decisions to hire a school counselor, including the school principals' preparation for hiring and the characteristics, skills, and qualifications they look for in a candidate for hire. Learning

what school principals look for when hiring school counselors could help educational institutions make wise choices in training and foster the professional development of school counselors and preparation for interviewing.

In this chapter, I thoroughly described the research process and procedures supporting coding, categories, and theme development. I will also provide the participants' demographics and characteristics and the data collection setting. I will conclude the chapter by discussing strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study's results.

Setting

Interviews were conducted from my home office, with my door closed, using the Zoom virtual platform. I interviewed the participants in their school offices. The time of the interviews varied based on participants' schedules. Three participants had unexpected issues that interfered with the original schedule and needed to reschedule their interviews. Most interviews occurred during school hours, with two after school. The interviews took place across 9 weeks.

Demographics

I collected demographic data as part of the interview process. The participants all worked in K-12 public schools within the United States. The participants were school principals from Georgia, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. All participants have been school principals for 5 or more years and have hired and worked with a school counselor for 2 or more years. Participants' ages ranged from 41 to 51. See Table 2 for a demographic breakdown.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Grade level	Years as school principal	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/Race
P1	Elementary	10	46	Female	African American/Black
P2	High school	12	49	Male	African American/Black
P3	Middle school	05	51	Male	African American/Black
P4	High school	10	46	Male	African American/Black
P5	K-12	12	50	Female	White/non-Hispanic
P6	Middle school	20	50	Female	African American/Black
P7	Middle/high school	13	51	Male	African American/Black
P8	Elementary	16	52	Female	White/Hispanic

Data Collection

Using purposeful and snowball sampling, I recruited eight participants who met the study's criteria. Data collection took 9 weeks to complete due to rescheduling. All participants were public school principals working in K-12 schools. Among the participants were elementary, middle, and high school principals. I used Instagram and Facebook to post flyers. I emailed invitations and informed consent forms to prospective participants. Once a possible participant responded, I followed up to ensure they reviewed the material and consented to an interview. All participants consented via email before the interview with the statement "I consent." The participants received a calendar invite to participate in the interview on the Zoom platform. I audiotaped the interviews

using the voice recorder app on my phone. There were eight semistructured interview questions and a ninth question for additional feedback. I asked, “Is there anything else you want to share?” Only four participants provided additional comments: P1, P2, P3, and P8. The average interview was approximately 35 minutes. Eight participants were sufficient to reach saturation because no new data emerged from the participants’ responses.

I began each interview by introducing myself and reviewing the purpose of the research study. I informed the participants that I would not be video recording and obtained their consent for audio recording the session. I employed my interview guide, asking the semistructured questions prepared along with probing for clarification and additional information. I concluded the interview by explaining that I would share the data with the participants for member checking. I listened to each interview before I transcribed the data by hand. I implemented the following measures to safeguard participants’ privacy: I deleted any identifying information, such as their names, placed information in secure data storage, and limited access to data. I will maintain the participants’ information on my computer, which is password protected. I am following Walden University’s guidelines on archiving and destroying confidential information. According to IRB guidelines, I must maintain and safely keep the data for 5 years and adhere to a specific protocol for destroying the archival data.

Data Analysis

I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis for data analysis. The first step was becoming familiar with the data, which included listening to the audio

interviews to get a thorough overview of the collected data before I analyzed individual items. This step involved transcribing audio, reading the text, and taking initial notes. Then, the audio-recording was hand transcribed verbatim. During this step, unnecessary fillers, such as *um* or *you know*, were removed. In step two, I began systematically creating codes across the data set and organizing the data by codes; this involves coding, highlighting text sections—usually phrases or sentences—and creating shorthand labels or codes to describe their content. Next, in step three, I grouped codes into themes by identifying patterns among codes and developing themes. This process involved carefully reviewing the coded data and searching for recurring words, phrases, or concepts, paying close attention to any similarities or differences within the data. Recurring words included *compassion*, *empathy*, *personable*, and *flexibility*. Recurring phrases included *teaching experience*, *no training in their schooling in hiring school counselors*, *learning through experience*, and *experience in a school setting*. I carefully examined the patterns and connections; I identified the underlying themes that emerged from the data.

Once completed, I reviewed and confirmed the themes and codes in step four to create a thematic map. My thematic map highlighted themes to ensure that the themes identified were valuable and accurate data representations (see Braun & Clark, 2006). Step five is where I named and defined themes. Naming and defining themes involved formulating precisely what they meant by each theme and figuring out how it helps me understand the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Naming themes consists of creating an understandable name for each theme.

In the final step, six, I confirmed the findings and wrote the results using a narrative passage that provides detailed descriptions of the data and the emerging uncovered themes. I also used an inductive approach to analysis to identify underlying meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clark (2006), inductive research, derived from researchers' observations, develops theory by building broader themes from participants' views. In each step of the analysis, I employed journaling as a method of reflexivity for myself. In hermeneutic phenomenological study, journaling provides an outlet to document my experiences while accounting for positionality concerns (Peoples, 2021). The hermeneutic circle, as explained by Gadamer, is a tool to transcend our biases and become more aware of our forethoughts and attitudes that shape our thoughts (Gadamer, 2004). Using the hermeneutic circle, I engaged in a continuous cycle of understanding and self-reflection, allowing for change and growth (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Following these steps supports the replication of this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Researchers must consider research trustworthiness when conducting a research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, demonstrating dependability and confirmability, and ensuring transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Shenton, 2004). I incorporated these strategies into my research to increase credibility among researchers and stakeholders (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

Qualitative research credibility is like internal validity in a quantitative project (Daniel, 2018; Shenton, 2004). The researcher establishes credibility, ensuring the data

are credible, relevant, and congruent (Daniel, 2018). The three techniques I used to ensure credibility in this study were reflexive journaling, member checking, and peer review. In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, journaling allowed me to document my experiences while accounting for positionality concerns (Peoples, 2021). Member check is a hermeneutic phenomenology technique that enables participants to review research findings and interpretations. As a result of involving the participants in this process, I obtained feedback from one participant (P8) and ensured that the research findings accurately reflected their experiences. Ensuring the findings reflect what the participants shared allows a researcher to validate their conclusions (Daniel, 2018).

In addition, I maintained an audit trail of documents associated with the research process (Daniel, 2018; Shenton, 2004). The audit trail included recording research decisions, data collection procedures, and any modifications made to the data during analysis (Shenton, 2004). The audit trail provided transparency in the research process and helped demonstrate the findings' validity.

Transferability

The purpose of the research study was to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences, not to generalize the findings. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe in achieving transferability, and a researcher provides explicit details about the context of the study and sufficient information so others can compare whether the research is like other settings. In this study, I provided detailed, "thick descriptions," clearly defining the target population to support transferability, including identifying characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200).

Dependability

Establishing dependability includes adhering to standard research practices and reporting procedures (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, I adhered to the guidelines outlined in the study. I provided the participants with the same semistructured interview questions within the exact time frame and allowed them to add any additional information they wished to share. I documented all data collection procedures to support replicating the study's findings. I ensured my research adherence to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, respecting the participants, maintaining participants' confidentiality, and mitigating potential conflicts of interest. Adhering to ethical guidelines ensured that my research was conducted with integrity, thus supporting dependability (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures confidence that research findings are participants' accounts and words without researcher bias. The strategies I used to ensure confirmability were reflective journaling, member-checking, and input provided by my committee members. Reflective journaling during data collection supports managing my thoughts and opinions. Reflective journaling was significant because I had a personal connection to the research topic. I emailed the interview transcripts to each participant for member-checking to confirm that I represented their accounts accurately. Only one participant responded. Based on the participants' feedback, noting their agreement with correctly represented data supported the study's confirmability.

Results

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a distinct methodology that guided me and the participants to engage in a way that helped deepen my understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of school principals when hiring school counselors. To answer the research question—What are the perceptions of principals interviewing and hiring school counselors in U.S. K-12 public schools?—I conducted semistructured interviews with eight school principals. The participants discussed their perceptions and experiences with hiring school counselors, including characteristics, qualifications, training, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on recruiting candidates. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis for data analysis, five themes emerged. Table 3 provides the five themes in relationship to the participants.

Table 3

Emergent Themes

	Participants							
Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
1. Principal education programs lack preparation for hiring and evaluating school counselors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Principal qualification preferences for school counselor hires are former teachers	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
3. Characteristics principals seek are empathy flexibility, and good communication skills	X	X		X	X			X
4. Principals value school counselors' references, not the educational program they attended	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5. Principals' hiring challenges are finding the best fit with limited candidates	X	X	X	X		X		X

Theme 1: Principal Education Programs Lack Preparation for Hiring and Evaluating School Counselors

Exploring the hiring experiences and perceptions of school principals who interview and employ school counselors supports understanding what they look for in successful candidates. Successful candidates would be school counselors who are hired based on the criteria of school principals. All participants (school principals) acknowledged that their educational program did not provide direct training to prepare them for hiring and evaluating school counselors. Participant 1 said, "I did not receive training in my program, but I actually completed the training to be able to evaluate school counselors when I became a school principal." Participant 2 had a similar experience and said, "There was no training to prepare for hiring school counselors. I did attend district-level training mainly about evaluating school counselors."

Other participants' experience hiring school counselors was obtained through on-the-job training once they became principals. Participant 3 elaborated on their experience of hiring and evaluating school counselors:

> My professional training program provided a foundation in understanding the diverse roles of school counselors, emphasizing their impact on academic, social-emotional, and career development. However, the training was more generalized and lacked specific modules on hiring or evaluating school counselors. Most of my preparedness came from on-the-job experiences, district-level workshops, and collaborative discussions with veteran counselors.

Participant 4 shared their experience in the principal's training program and said,

> When you talk about practice training, my principal's training has a couple layers. Obviously, you go through your massive speed, an education program, it gives you the ground work of what you know, how you operate and function and govern. This aligned to your leadership standards that we must uphold. You know the job that is embedded, and you develop from doing the job. Your leaders and individuals that you learn throughout your journey, and then the final layer is this experience. There was nothing specific to hiring school counselors.

Professional development trainings and workshops were a continuing thread that focused on school counselor evaluation tools. P5 stated,

> I don't think that my college training provided any experience. As an administrator, there were professional development sessions around new evaluation tools, and school counselors got a particular evaluation tool, so I was trained in that. I would say that it was on-the-job training.

Participants 6, 7, and 8 explained that school counselors are hired based on their schools' needs. Participant 6 said, "Knowing the needs of my school in general, as well as the needs of the students within my school, along with the overall needs of my school community/population, prepares me to hire and evaluate for my school counseling position." Similarly, Participant 7 stated, "Time in the job, hands-on experience … with knowing your school climate and knowing your culture.' Along those same lines, Participant 8 said, "It's about the needs of your school."

Theme 2: Principals Qualification Preferences for School Counselor Hires Are Former Teachers

All eight participants preferred hiring school counselors who were former teachers or those with prior experience working in a school setting. Participant 1 said, "Usually, I prefer someone who has had some type of instructional background that they have been a teacher because they can relate more with teachers." Participant 2 stated, "I prefer school counseling candidates to have been a teacher because they understand the school environment." Participants expressed the exact sentiment of the value of former teachers who become school counselors. Participant 3 said, "Experience working with middle school students, particularly in an educational setting." Participant 4 said, "In my state, counselors have a teaching background, so I also value their experience as teachers when considering hiring them." Participant 5 stated, "School counselors who have been teachers can understand and relate better to teachers because they know what teacher needs." Participate 6 said, "They need the degrees and counseling certification, but I would like someone who has been a teacher." Participant 7 said, "My past hires have all been former teachers, and they are still working for me." Participant 8 said, "They need to have experience in school settings, such as teachers, tutors, or substitute teachers."

Theme 3: Characteristics Principals Seek Are Empathy, Flexibility, and Good Communication Skills

Five participants used empathy, flexibility, and good communication skills as essential characteristics for a school counseling candidate for hire. Participant 1 said, "Someone who is personable and flexible, someone who genuinely loves kids.

"Participant 2 said, "Someone with empathy and someone who can communicate well with students and parents. They also need to have good interaction and communication with teachers." Participants 7 and 8 responses were very similar. Participant 7 said, "The characteristics of a school counseling candidate I look for are a good listener, patience, empathetic, and flexibility." Participant 8 said, "Empathy, compassion, and flexibility, being a good-hearted human being." Participant 3 shared, "I prioritize candidates who demonstrate strong interpersonal and communication skills and empathy. An ability to build trusting relations with students, staff, and families."

Theme 4: Principals Value School Counselors' References Not the Educational Programs They Attended

All eight participants voiced that the educational program the school counselor attended had no impact on their hiring decisions. Participant 1 states,

> Their educational background doesn't matter to me as long as they have the degrees and counseling certification . . . and have been teachers. More important is making sure you speak with references directly; don't call numbers just because somebody gives you a number if they work at a building called the building, not cell phone numbers, so that you can get true references.

Participant 2 Said, "The educational program does not impact hiring as long as the candidate is equipped with skills to be an effective school counselor." Participant 3 said,

> The educational program is one factor but not the most critical. I value candidates with degrees from accredited programs that focus on counseling practices and include comprehensive fieldwork. However, practical experience demonstrated

> skills and alignment with the school's vision often outweigh the specific institution they attended.

Participant 4 said, "I don't really think it's very important because … I value their experience as teachers." Participant 5 said, "The educational program should provide the skills the school counselor needs for their role and knowledge of the ASCA model." Participants 6 and 7 noted that the educational program had no bearing on their hiring decisions. While Participant 8 said,

> I'm not necessarily looking for a candidate who comes in and knows all the book stuff like that. To me, anyone can do that, but if you don't have those other characteristics of a good-hearted person, it doesn't matter. Following up on references and paying careful attention to the references' responses are more important.

Theme 5: Principals' Hiring Challenges Are Finding the Best Fit With Limited Candidates

Seven participants expressed that finding the best candidate for their school is the most challenging hiring factor. They highlighted the need for the candidate to understand the culture of their schools. Participant 2 said,

> Finding candidates who align with the unique needs of our middle school population, particularly those experienced in addressing adolescent social-emotional. Also, the pandemic increased the demand for counselors due to the heightened social-emotional needs of students, making it more competitive to recruit to candidates.

Participant 3 said there is “a limited pool of candidates with the required certification and experience and finding candidates who align with the unique needs of your school. Additionally, many qualified candidates left the field.” Participant 3 associated the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason for qualified school candidates leaving the educational field. Participant 4 provided an in-depth response on challenges in hiring school counselors. Participant 4 said,

> It’s challenging finding the best fit. Getting someone able to work in an urban education setting and candidates not having the experience because of the shutdown. The pandemic increased the demand for counselors due to the heightened social-emotional needs of students, making it more competitive to recruit top candidates. The shift to remote hiring processes made it challenging to assess interpersonal skills effectively.

Participant 8 also indicating experiencing difficulty finding the best candidates for their school and said,

> We lost a lot of good teachers and staff to COVID. People seem like they don’t want to work. People got used to working at home. We went on the third round of interviews for school counselors. In the first and second rounds, there were no good fits. No individual made the cut. At the beginning of the next school year, we had another round, and there were two candidates in that pool that were pretty good.to make the final decision, I had to rely on my gut feelings.

The authentic responses of the participants provided me with a better understanding of the lived experience of school principals and their perception of the importance of factors that lead to hiring school counselors.

Summary

An exploration of school principals' hiring experiences sheds some light on their perception of the characteristics they look for and how they make decisions about the candidates they ultimately hire. By learning the school principal's perception of qualities and characteristics, school counselors with certain types of prior work experience will foster the professional development of school counselors. In Chapter 5, I analyze and interpret the participants' perceptions and experiences that led to the study's findings. There were five themes I identified based on the thematic map groups: (a) school principals' education programs lack preparation for hiring and evaluating school counselors; (b) school principals' qualification preference for school counselor hires are former teachers; (c) characteristic school principals seek are empathy, flexibility, and strong communication skills; (d) principals value school counselors' references, not the educational program they attended; and (e) principals hiring challenges are finding the best fit with limited candidates. I then discuss the limitations and future research recommendations regarding school principals' perceptions of hiring school counselors. Lastly, I discuss the implications of the study's findings before concluding.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to understand the perceptions of school principals when hiring school counselors to serve the needs of their students, parents, and community stakeholders in U.S. K-12 public schools. Exploring school principals' hiring perceptions provided information on the characteristics and qualifications that lead principals to decide on the candidates they ultimately hire. The findings of this research study have potential implications for positive social change by highlighting current hiring practices that will help educational institutions make wise choices and foster the professional development of school counselors. The knowledge obtained from the study could support school counseling candidates when preparing for school counseling interviews.

In this chapter, I analyze and interpret the participants' perceptions and experiences that led to the study's findings. Furthermore, I discuss limitations, recommendations, and implications for social change based on the findings. There were five themes I identified following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis: (a) school principals' education programs lack preparation for hiring and evaluating school counselors; (b) school principals' qualification preference for school counselor hires are former teachers; (c) characteristics school principals seek are empathy, flexibility, and strong communication skills; (d) school principals value school counselors' references, not the educational program they attended; and (e) school principals' hiring challenges are finding the best fit with limited candidates. The

principals' perceptions and experiences shed light on their decision-making process when evaluating and hiring school counselors they perceive to be the best for their school culture.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study contributes to understanding school principals' practices when hiring school counselors. Guided by hermeneutics phenomenology theory, I explored the participants' lived experiences and sought to understand school principals' perceptions of the qualities and characteristics of successful candidates. Successful candidates refer to those principals select to hire for their schools.

Principals' Perception of Necessary Qualifications of Candidates

There has been continual debate surrounding the need for school counselors to be former teachers and the importance of this qualification for principals (Baker, 1994; Baker & Herr, 1976; Olson & Allen, 1993; Smith et al., 2001). Previous studies by Beale (1995) and Goodman-Scott et al. (2020) noted that the participants prefer hiring school counselors with prior teaching experience. Even though changes have taken place allowing non-teachers to become school counselors (ASCA, 2020; Paisley & Hubbard, 1989), the present study found that principals still identify former teaching experience as a preferred qualification and significant consideration when hiring school counselors. All the school counselors employed by participants in the present study were former teachers. Participant 2 stated, "I prefer school counseling candidates to have been a teacher because they understand the school environment." However, none of the participants in the current study realized their state did not require prior teaching experience or have

alternate routes for non-teachers to become qualified school counselors. Participant 4 said, “In my state, counselors have a teaching background, so I also value their experience as teachers when considering hiring them.”

School counselors are required to have a master’s level degree (ASCA, 2019). Counseling programs accredited by CACREP (2024) must complete a minimum of 100 supervised practicum hours and 600 hours of internship. The purpose of practicum and internship is to provide school counselors with experience working with students in a school environment (CACREP, 2024). These activities help school counselors in training gain the limited teaching experience needed when working in the K-12 school environment. CACREP reflects preparation standards based on education reforms and societal changes, which are revisited and revised every 7 years in response to societal shifts (Akos & Duquette, 2022). Nevertheless, in the present study, the principals placed minimal or no importance on the educational institution or program a candidate attended. This perception is congruent with Beal’s (1995) findings that principals only place minimal value on the educational program a school counselor attends when interviewing candidates.

The other qualifications identified in the present study were that school counseling candidates must have a master’s degree, which is also an ASCA (2019) requirement, and state-required certifications, which ASCA requires (2019). Participant 1 states, “Their educational background doesn’t matter to me as long as they have the degrees and counseling certification … and have been a teacher.” The principals emphasized having strong references and the importance of contacting each reference.

Participant 1 said, “More important is making sure you speak with references directly; don’t call numbers just because somebody gives you a number if they work at a building, call the building, not cell phone numbers, so that you can get true references.”

The findings suggest that school principals do not understand the value and rigor of schooling that prepares highly qualified candidates regardless of their work experience. As a graduate of a CACREP-approved institution, I know the value of the training curriculum and the gatekeeping elements that ensure school counselors’ preparation for their role in the education system. This lack of understanding may lead to undervaluing the importance of rigorous preparation and the essential role of gatekeeping in maintaining high standards for school counselors. Recognizing and appreciating the comprehensive training CACREP-approved programs provide is crucial, ensuring that school counselors are well-equipped to support students effectively. To that extent, CACREP reviewed and updated its guidelines in 2024 to support evolving student needs (CACREP, 2024).

In reviewing my notes, I noticed that the participants glossed over or moved on to discuss why other skills were more significant than the educational program or institution a school counselor attended. In my reflection, I connected this to the participants’ preference for hiring former teachers. Hiring former teachers as school counselors can bring a unique perspective and understanding of the classroom environment, which can benefit addressing student needs (Beal, 1995; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). However, this approach may overlook the specialized training that CACREP-approved programs provide, which equips counselors with skills in mental health support, career guidance,

and academic advising (Blake, 2022). Balancing both perspectives could lead to a more holistic approach to recruiting practices. Understanding preparation ensures that school counselors have the comprehensive expertise required to support all aspects of student development.

Principals' Perception of Characteristics Needed in Candidates

ASCA (2019a) stated that school counselors must possess strong communication skills to effectively interact with students, parents, teachers, and administrators daily. Empathy and compassion for students will allow school counselors to connect with students emotionally and establish a more profound level of trust (ASCA, 2019a). According to the current study participants, the characteristics they look for in potential candidates are strong communication skills, empathy, and compassion. The second participant mentioned that they were looking for someone who has empathy and can communicate well with students and parents. Participant 3 said, "I put a high priority on candidates who show strong interpersonal skills, strong communication skills, and strong empathy … A skilled and caring approach to building trusting relationships between students, staff, and families." Participant 8 stated, "Empathy, compassion, and flexibility, as well as being a good-hearted human being." The characteristics identified by the participants, such as compassion, empathy, and strong communication skills, align with ASCA (2019a).

Another characteristic that four participants identified as necessary was flexibility. Participant 8 explained that school counselors need to be flexible and able to "fill in for teachers in the classroom" and other areas required in the school. Lewis et al. (2020) and

Ruiz et al. (2018) suggested that the assignment of non-counseling duties is due to a lack of understanding by the principals of the school counselor role, along with a need for administrative support. Other past research has shown that principals experience the duties of professional school counselors based on the duties assigned by the former administrators (Ruiz et al., 2018). All the participants in the current study noted receiving on-the-job training and experience to support their understanding of hiring and working with school counselors.

Principals Interviewing Practice for Hiring School Counselors

Previous research noted that principals sometimes misuse school counselors (Lewis et al., 2020), and principal preparation programs could provide knowledge of effectively utilizing school counselors. None of the participants in the current study received training specifically for hiring and utilizing school counselors. In a past study, Ruiz et al. (2018) showed that principals' knowledge of the duties of school counselors is based on the responsibilities assigned by former administrators. In the present study, participants acquired their knowledge of school counselors' roles and responsibilities from on-the-job experience and mentors. Some participants attended district-level training that focused on school counselor evaluations. None of the participants acknowledged using the ASCA (2019) suggestions for the characteristics of school counselors or ASCA suggestions for interview questions for hiring school counseling candidates.

McGlothlin and Miller (2008) suggested guidelines for school principals to assist in effectively hiring school counselors. The authors explained how a conversation can

help principals choose school counselors who align with their goals and support the administrative decisions made by the school. However, Goodman-Scott et al. (2022) noted that there are no specific guidelines for hiring school counselors. As part of the present study, participants reported that they experienced difficulties finding the best candidate for their school during the interview process. O'Hara and Probst (2016) emphasized that the difficulty in selecting the most suitable candidates for school counselor positions is due to administrators' lack of knowledge about the roles and functions of school counselors. In addition, O'Hara and Probst (2016) advocated using a group approach rather than a single-individual approach when it comes to competency-based hiring. The participants in the present study acknowledged that they conducted interviews in teams, with the principal making the final decision.

This study contributes to school counseling by providing knowledge and a better understanding of what qualifications, characteristics, and formats inform principals' perceptions when hiring a school counselor. Based on the literature reviewed, the data generated highlight the qualification barrier and traditions present in today's schools in hiring practices. As a former school counselor who did not have teaching experience, I felt disappointed that historical employment hurdles may continue to present barriers for new school counselors. Therefore, utilizing the process of the hermeneutic circle, I acknowledged my prejudgments and biases before I analyzed the data. My self-analyzing allowed me to deeply understand the participants' lived experiences through the lens of their perceptions. Furthermore, the approach enhanced my understanding and ensured the findings were grounded in the participants' real-world experiences. By reflecting on my

journey, I aimed to provide a more empathetic and comprehensive view of school principals' challenges in the hiring process.

Contributions of the Study to the School Counseling Field

The study's findings contribute to knowledge of the counseling field, specifically school counseling. Exploring school principals' hiring experiences illuminated some of the primary qualifications and characteristics they look for and how principals decide on the candidates they ultimately hire. Learning about the benefits or challenges of hiring school counselors with certain types of prior work experience will help educational institutions make wise choices and foster the professional development of school counselors. Through this study, I added to the body of knowledge by providing a better understanding of what qualifications principals look for when hiring a school counselor.

Reflections

This hermeneutic phenomenological research study sought to understand school principals' perceptions when hiring school counselors using Heidegger's hermeneutic and employing the hermeneutic circle. Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy focuses on interpreting human experiences and the meaning of being. It emphasizes understanding the participants' perceptions through context and the interconnectedness of individuals and their environments. The hermeneutic circle, a key concept in this philosophy, involves a continuous process of interpreting parts of a text or experience in relation to the whole and vice versa, deepening comprehension over time. I believe this was the most appropriate approach to provide an answer to the research question. The study contributes to school counseling by providing knowledge and a better understanding of

what qualifications, characteristics, and formats that guide principals' perceptions when hiring a school counselor. Based on the literature review, the data highlighted the remaining qualification barriers in hiring practices in today's schools.

Therefore, utilizing the process of the hermeneutic circle, I acknowledged my prejudgments and biases before I analyzed the data. My self-analysis allowed me to understand the participants' lived experiences through the lens of their perceptions, acknowledging that the participants had only worked with school counselors who were former teachers. Through reflective journaling, I was able to review my thoughts and keep an open mind to the experiences of the participants. Furthermore, the approach enhanced my understanding and ensured that the findings were grounded in the participants' real-world experiences.

Limitations of the Study

This phenomenological study sought to describe the lived experiences of principals who have recruited, hired, and worked with school counselors, which has a few limitations. Several factors supported the sample size in phenomenological research studies, such as the research question, the study's purpose, and the nature of the study (Patton, 2015). However, the transferability of the findings will be limited to school principals who fit the study's criteria. There were time constraints for the participants and the researcher, which did not allow for extensive interviews outside a 35-45-minute interview process. Interview times were rescheduled based on the unpredictable issues that arose in the school environment. For the participants, it was important to be efficient

with the allotted time in the interviews. A final limitation is that all the study participants were from U.S. K-12 public schools.

Recommendations

The data highlighted the process, preferred qualifications, and essential characteristics when hiring school counselors. Even in highlighting this information, questions arise regarding training programs for school principals, hiring of school counselors without a former teaching background, and understanding of school counselor preparation programs. Recommendations for further research include exploring how principals develop their knowledge of the school counselor's role in their schools and the school principals' training and understanding of school counselors' educational preparation programs. In future studies, researchers should explore if and why principals prefer to hire former teachers for school counseling positions. The study can support understanding what school principals' preferences are based on, i.e., tradition, experience, or possibly not knowing recent policy changes.

Additionally, researchers should examine principals' perceptions of the professional identity of school counselors and if this perception impacts the assignment of duties. For example, if a principal identifies their school counselor as an educator, they may be more likely to assign them to a classroom when a teacher is absent instead of having them available for the crisis. If they identify the school counselor as a mental health provider, school principals may consider support groups and individual counseling more significant. Finally, I would like to see future researchers conduct a quantitative study comparing school counselors with and without teaching experience to highlight and

perhaps dispel the myths that some principals have related to school counselors' job performance.

Implications

The school counseling profession is a specialized field within education that focuses on providing support and guidance to students in areas such as academic achievement, career development, and personal/social growth (ASCA, 2019; Donohue et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). School counselors work within educational institutions to help students navigate challenges and maximize their potential. Ensuring that qualified school counselors are hired is important for every school. In this section, I discussed the implications of the study's findings in five specific domains. The study's findings could lead to significant advancements in the school counseling profession by identifying the impact in each of the following domains addressed: counseling, training/education, supervision, research, and leadership/advocacy. The study's findings in school counseling could enhance intervention strategies, while in training/education, they might improve curriculum design. In Supervision, they could refine oversight practices, and in Research, they could inspire new studies. Finally, in Leadership/Advocacy, they might strengthen policy making and advocacy efforts.

School Counseling

The results from the current study indicated that school principals preferred hiring school counselors who were former teachers. Despite changes that allow non-teachers to become school counselors (ASCA, 2020), in the current study, all the principals considered former teaching experience a vital qualification when hiring school

counselors. The ASCA is a professional organization dedicated to supporting school counselors in their roles and responsibilities. As an authority in the school counselor profession, ASCA sets standards that provide guidelines and expectations for school counselors in schools. School counseling professionals may need to address the needs of diversity factors in hiring decisions, as principals might prioritize candidates based on old policies. The ASCA needs to be aware of potential perceptions principals could hold, such as favoring candidates from specific educational backgrounds or with other personal characteristics of their scope.

The study's results can be used to address these preferences and help create a more equitable and effective counseling environment. By prioritizing ongoing professional development, counseling professionals can better advocate for practices that align with the diverse backgrounds of the students they serve. The results from this study can also be used to provide training and workshops for school administrators to inform them of current policies and standards for school counselors.

Training and Education

The result of this study showed that school principals are not familiar with the training school counselors receive in formal and hands-on training before receiving their certificate as a school counselor. Although states vary in their additional requirements, a master's degree is required for school counselors (ASCA, 2019). If school principals consider the educational program a school counselor attended, they can learn of the candidate's preparation in training and utilize school counselors for their intended purpose and scope of practice. Consequently, the results from this study can inform

principals' program training with district-level workshops. By understanding the full scope of what school counselors can offer, principals can make more informed hiring decisions that enhance student support services.

Supervision

The results of this study can influence school counselors' supervision practices to incorporate a greater understanding of the specific criteria and qualifications principals prioritize during the hiring process. The supervisors who provide training during practicum and internships can ensure that the principal understands the training curriculum and the exposure school counselors receive during their on-the-job training.

Supervisors may need to provide the school principals with information about the classroom experience of school counselors in training, which incorporates practical, hands-on experiences that reflect the real-world challenges faced in educational settings. The results from this study can provide on-site supervisors with specific training in identifying the specific needs of each trainee according to strengths and possible deficits. The results from the study may also emphasize an individualized approach to supervision.

Research

This study supports further research and raises additional questions regarding hiring practices and barriers different candidates may face based on prior work experience. Also, the research findings may provide guidelines for school counselors to understand the interview process and preparation for employment. The principals in the study had no experience working with counselors who were not former teachers. This

lack of experience with non-teacher counselors may lead to biases in hiring decisions, as principals might favor candidates with similar backgrounds. Such biases could result in overlooking qualified candidates with unique skills and perspectives.

Future research should investigate how these biases impact school counseling staff diversity and effectiveness. This lack of knowledge may indicate a need for increased awareness and training among principals to understand better the diverse backgrounds and skills that non-teacher school counselors can bring (Mulhern, 2020).

Ruiz et al. (2018) suggest that school counselor duty assignments are based on former administrators. However, the characteristics school principals seek in school counselor hiring candidates align with many of the characteristics that the ASCA (2019) identifies as needed by school counselors. All the principals in the current study identified empathy, compassion, and strong communication skills as essential characteristics, and several noted flexibility as a key characteristic. The ASCA sets the standards and competencies required for effective school counseling. Additionally, research could help identify the value school principals place on the guidelines and recommendations of the ASCA (2019) hiring recommendations or suggestions for interview questions.

Leadership/Advocacy

The results of this study indicated a significant need for school counseling professionals to advocate for school counselors based on current standards, which could lead to hiring decisions prioritizing candidates who align with ASCA qualifications. ASCA qualifications ensure that school counselors are equipped with the necessary skills

and knowledge to support students effectively. These standards emphasize the importance of comprehensive counseling programs that address academic, career, and social/emotional development. By prioritizing candidates who meet these qualifications, schools can enhance their ability to provide students with the guidance and support they need to succeed.

The study's results emphasized how critical it is for school counselors to advocate for themselves. Self-advocacy empowers school counselors to highlight their skills and contributions, ensuring they are recognized and valued within the educational system. By actively advocating for their roles and responsibilities, counselors can secure necessary resources and support to serve their students effectively. For example, school counselors can use their resumes to highlight their skills and training in the hiring process. If allowed to make an introduction during the interview process, the candidate can identify their unique skills and qualifications for the position. Additionally, self-advocacy can lead to professional growth opportunities, further enhancing their ability to impact the school community positively.

Conclusion

In this study, I explored the perception of school principals interviewing and hiring school counselors in U.S. K-12 public schools. This study's findings contribute to the advancement of hiring qualified professional school counselors by highlighting challenges, barriers, and opportunities associated with hiring qualified school counselors in various nationwide districts. The five themes found in this study were: (a) school principals' education programs lack preparation for hiring and evaluating school

counselors; (b) school principals' qualification preference for school counselor hires are former teachers; (c) characteristics school principals seek are empathy, flexibility, and strong communication skills; (d) school principals value school counselors' references, not the educational program they attended; and (e) school principals' hiring challenges are finding the best fit with limited candidates. Current state licensure requirements for professional school counselors, historical policies for teaching experience, and the ambiguity of the role of school counselors still present barriers in the hiring process. The findings of this study could potentially inform policies and practices aimed at enhancing inclusivity, diversifying, and removing barriers that limit the pool of qualified individuals entering the school counseling profession, ultimately benefiting students and educators.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire and Semistructured Interview Guide

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your age?

3. What is your ethnicity and race?

4. How long have you worked as a school principal/administrator?

5. What state do you work in as a school principal/administrator?

6. Are you an elementary, middle, or high school principal/administrator?

6. Have you hired a school counselor?

Interview Question Guide

1. In what ways, if any, did your professional training program prepare you to hire and evaluate the school counselor role?
2. What characteristics or skills of a school counseling candidate do you look for when hiring?
3. How important is the educational program the school counselor attended in your decision when evaluating a school counseling candidate for hire?
4. What qualifications of a counseling candidate for hire are most important?
5. What are your beliefs and perceptions about the role and function of school counselors you hire?
6. Describe any challenges you have experienced recruiting and hiring candidates you believe are most qualified for your school.

7. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted recruiting and hiring school counseling candidates for your school?
8. What recommendations would you give K-12 school principals for recruiting and hiring the best counseling candidate for the role in their schools?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B: Invitation

There is a new study about hiring school counselors that could help principals better understand the qualifications they seek in school counseling candidates. For this study, you are invited to describe your perspective on what you look for when hiring school counselors.

About the study:

- One 30-60 minute interview using the Zoom Platform that will be audio recorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Public school principals (K-12)
- Having 5 years in their role
- Have hired and worked with the school counselor for at least 2 years.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Wendy C. Vaughn, a doctoral student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during October.

Please reach out to wendy.vaughn@waldenu.edu to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.