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Experiences of Black Women School Counselors Coping with Student Suicide

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2025

Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Suicide represents a major public health and educational concern and presents profound emotional and professional challenges for school counselors. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of nine certified school counselors of color who had experienced the death of a student by suicide while employed in K–12 educational settings. With this research, I sought to answer the question: What are the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have had a student die by suicide? Guided by Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological framework, this study employed bracketing to set aside researcher bias and uncover the essence of participants lived experiences through semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' modified van Kaam method, which involved horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering of invariant constituents, and the development of textural and structural descriptions to capture the essence of participants lived experiences. Data from the analysis resulted in six essential themes: (a) the emotional difficulty of student suicide for counselors of color, (b) suppression of emotions due to the strong Black woman schema, (c) self-reflection and grief-based rumination, (d) reliance on spirituality and social networks as coping tools, (e) increased professional vigilance after student suicide, and (f) counselors' confidence in addressing future suicides. These findings support culturally responsive support and training that promote counselor wellness and foster more equitable, inclusive school communities.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my parents, Drs. Ronald and Elizabeth Ray. To my father in heaven, thank you for being my angel and guiding light. You were the ultimate Girl Dad, and I miss you more than words can express. I carry your love, strength, and wisdom with me every day. I know you are beaming with pride from above, which brings me comfort and joy. To my mother, thank you for your unwavering love, encouragement, and faith in me. You have been my rock, prayer warrior, biggest cheerleader, and best friend. From the toughest days as a counselor to the brightest moments of this journey, you stood beside me with grace, patience, and boundless love. Thank you for letting me cry, laugh, vent, take breaks, and be human through it all. Your strength and light are unmatched; you are the definition of a star. You have both been the most incredible parents I could ever ask for, and I am forever grateful. This achievement belongs to all of us. I am so proud to carry on the Ray legacy and to be now Dr. Ray, just like the two of you. Thank you for standing in the gap, leading by example, and showing me what it means to walk in purpose. To my puppy Wynter Grace, affectionately known as Gracie: Thanks for staying up late at night and keeping me company with all of my writing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

Suicide is a critical global public health and social issue, with approximately 800,000 individuals dying by suicide each year worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). The social and psychological costs of suicide are high. For every suicide, it is estimated that between six and 20 individuals—often family members, friends, or colleagues—are significantly affected both psychologically and emotionally (Kim et al., 2020). Research suggests that suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents ages 10 to 24 in the United States (Reis & Cornell, 2008). For this reason, school counselors are in an ideal position to help the growing number of children who express suicidal thoughts or behaviors (Gallo & Wacheter Morris, 2022). Children and adolescents spend significant amounts of time at school, making school counselors the primary suicide and risk assessors for this population (Becnel et.al., 2021). School counselors are more likely to assess youth for suicide than any other mental health professional. In addition to supporting comprehensive suicide prevention and postvention efforts, school counselors address students' academic, career, and social/emotional development, playing a pivotal role in fostering overall student well-being (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Despite ongoing advancements in prevention strategies, the prevalence of youth suicide and suicidal behaviors continues to pose a significant public health concern. Suicide remains the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10 to 24 in the United States, with rates increasing by over 50% between 2000 and 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). Some school counselors may find it challenging to coordinate with other community

mental health professionals when caring for suicidal students. In addition, working with students with suicidal ideations have been found to lead to stress and burnout in professional workload (Posluns, 2020). To provide effective mental health services, counselors must develop a professional working alliance with students and maintain appropriate boundaries and levels of emotional or psychological involvement. However, establishing and maintaining this one-way working alliance can take significant effort and energy. Consequently, counselors are at an elevated risk for adverse outcomes such as stress, burnout, and professional impairment (Posluns & Gall, 2020).

Counselors must be supported in professional development to increase their efforts to prepare for suicide prevention, assessment, and intervention (Benel et al., 2021). Losing a student to suicide is often considered an occupational hazard, but clinician reactions to it are poorly understood, and it is essential to improve this understanding (Kalmoe et al., 2019). Patient suicide can significantly affect healthcare professionals, with clinicians themselves considered as potential *second victims* following such adverse patient events.

As youth suicide rises, it has become increasingly important to understand how school counselors are prepared to work with suicidal youth and the impact of suicidality on counselors (Benel et.al., 2021). Counselors uniformly have experienced the suicide of a student as stressful, and for a substantial number, the event has a significant lasting impact on their personal and professional lives. For instance, many report feeling guilt, sadness, anger, increased fear of dealing with suicidal patients, and anniversary reactions to the event. Survivor's guilt is an intricate psychological phenomenon that has received

considerable attention in the domain of mental health (Bistas, & Grewal, 2023). The suicide of a patient can profoundly affect mental health clinicians, leading to considerations of early retirement or career change, feelings of professional inadequacy, increased vigilance in assessing suicide risk, and self-doubt regarding clinical competence (Sandford et al., 2021).

Schools are recognized as crucial settings for youth mental health support and suicide prevention activities, yet schools also face staff shortages and ever-increasing responsibilities for student well-being (Ayer et al.,2023). Educational institutions must be equipped with evidence-based resources, clear protocols, and responsive strategies to effectively support both students and school personnel in the aftermath of a student suicide (Vaillancourt & Gibson, 2014). Additionally, schools must diversify and retain black mental health professionals who can help support faculty and students. These professionals are essential for ensuring that the counseling staff reflects the diversity of the student population, so that all students have someone to look for support. One side of this is helping school counselors when dealing with work-related stress, such as dealing with suicide in the educational arena. This could promote counselor wellness and minimize impairment. Additionally, research indicates that school counselors of color may experience unique demands, such as being called upon to act as role models to many students and may be sought by parents of color more than their White counterparts (McCarthy et al., 2010), potentially compounding the stress they may experience when coping with a student's suicide.

It is apparent that counselors need to be able to manage and cope with the impact of student suicide ideation or behavior so that they can also support others who are struggling with the same event or trauma symptoms. Listening to the voices of counselors of color who have experienced a student's death by suicide may help to understand better how to support others who face similar challenges. With the stress and workload of a professional school counselor, it is imperative that an understanding of the risk factors and processes that contribute to school counselors' stress, such as a student's suicide, is necessary to help these professionals continue to function effectively in meeting the challenges of today's schools, to provide the best services possible to students, and to prevent the field from losing capable individuals to exhaustion and burnout (McCarthy et al., 2010).

In this chapter, I present background information about suicide. Then, I will discuss the problem and the purpose of my study. I state the research question followed by the theoretical framework. Next, I will describe the nature of the study and possible data types and sources. In addition, I provide definitions, assumptions, and address the scope and delimitations of my study. Finally, I address limitations, significance, and provide a summary.

Background

Counselors who have experienced the suicide of a client in a professional setting often report initial reactions of emotional numbness, denial, and profound shock, which can significantly disrupt their clinical functioning and emotional well-being (Hendin et al., 2000). Following exposure to a patient's suicide, mental health professionals may

experience heightened sensitivity to suicide risk, diminished professional confidence, and a tendency to adopt more conservative clinical practices, particularly when working with vulnerable youth populations (Pynoos et al., 2009). The risk of suicide among youth is a daunting public health concern that requires collaborative and coordinated prevention and intervention efforts. Suicide has been considered the second leading cause of death among children and youth aged 10-24 years in the United States, totaling nearly 20% of deaths among this age group (Freda & Deihl, 2022).

Some of the emotions that counselors report after the suicide of a student or client include feelings of losing control, anger toward the mental health system, as well as profound grief and sadness (Hendin et al., 2000). School counselors who have experienced the loss of a student to suicide or have worked with students exhibiting suicidal ideations often report a range of professional reactions. These reactions include heightened awareness of suicide risk, diminished professional confidence, fear of publicity and litigation, increased referrals to psychiatrists, and feelings of sadness in the workplace. Such experiences can profoundly impact counselors' emotional well-being and influence their clinical practices (Becnel et al., 2021). Experiencing diminished professional competence can contribute to elevated stress, compassion fatigue, and eventual burnout among school-based mental health professionals (Paiva-Salisbury & Schwanz, 2022).

Suicide has profound social and psychological repercussions, significantly impacting a wide circle of individuals beyond the deceased. Recent research indicated that each suicide affects an average of 135 people who knew the individual, including

family members, friends, and colleagues, many of whom may experience emotional and psychological distress as a result (Cerel et al., 2018). As counselors work with students who face challenges within the educational system, it is important to acknowledge that school counselors of color are often underrepresented and face systemic barriers that affect their visibility and engagement in the organizational structure of school counseling practices (Dollarhide et al., 2013). For example, current theoretical models of grief often fail to reflect the culturally specific ways in which Black Americans experience and express grief, underscoring the limitations of applying Western frameworks universally (Moore et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to explore this phenomenon further.

While there is substantial literature on school counselors' roles in suicide prevention and their experiences following student suicides, studies that center on the unique perspectives of counselors of color are scarce. Gallo et al. (2021) conducted a phenomenological study examining elementary school counselors' experiences with suicidal students, identifying themes such as emotional distress and insufficient professional support. Granello and Zyromski (2018) examined school counselors ʾself-efficacy related to suicide prevention and found that many counselors felt underprepared. Due to this, there is a gap in scholarly literature regarding the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have coped with the suicide of a student, which is why this population will be the focus of this study.

Black mental health is not a new concern; however, there is a pressing need to increase awareness of issues pertinent to African American communities, such as cultural safety and systemic inequalities. Jimenez (2022) emphasized that racism—manifesting at

internalized, interpersonal, and systemic levels—has a profound and negative impact on communities of color, leading to disparities in mental health outcomes and access to care. Education and training for future counselors should include and pay attention to Black people's experiences due to four primary reasons: (a) historic racism, lower income, threat of violence; (b) poor treatment of African Americans has caused a mistrust, historically; (c) negative attitudes toward help-seeking; and (d) accessibility of support based on a person's needs. The need for cultural safety and commitment to increasing knowledge of mental health and the inequalities and social determinants of health in black communities illustrates the importance of culture, race, and ethnicity.

This study is needed to add insight into how school counselors can use coping tools postvention of student death by suicide. School counselors should be able to learn strategies that will allow them to effectively cope with a student's death by suicide in work settings and be a resource to faculty, staff, community, and the overall student body when a crisis happens in an educational setting. Furthermore, the focus on school counselors of color is needed to identify ways to help them cope with strategies that are unique to their culture and the balance of being African American, sometimes in an environment where their counterparts are of a different race.

Problem Statement

The issue that prompted me to conduct this study was the daunting concern of the number of lives lost to suicide and its impact on the community. More specifically, the social impact of suicide on counselors of color who have survived the traumatic impact of suicide in their role as school counselors. A counselor's complex emotions and perception

of failure can leave them seeking assistance to make sense of the event. This could lead to counselor impairment, which can have an alarming impact on counselors and communities.

Mental health is a global priority at every stage of life, and it is particularly important to provide emotional and psychological support for youth within schools. Students ’well-being should be prioritized in schools through psychoeducation and social-emotional learning, facilitated by teacher support and counselor interventions as needed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). School counselors often support students by encouraging social, emotional, and behavioral development. Therefore, school counselors are well-positioned to implement suicide prevention and intervention programs, as they are specifically trained to recognize and respond to students at risk for suicidal ideation (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2021). Despite increased prevention efforts, youth suicide rates remain alarmingly high. According to the CDC’s 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), approximately 20.4% of high school students reported seriously considering attempting suicide in the past 12 months, and 9.5% reported having attempted suicide during the same period. These figures highlight the persistent and critical nature of youth suicide as a public health issue. The ASCA (2021) suggested that over the past several decades, scholars have identified the significant impact that a death by suicide can have on survivors, including helping professionals.

Given the prevalence of youth suicide, the critical role that school counselors play, and the scarcity of research on school counselors of color, the exploration of the

impact of a student's suicide on school counselors of color is needed. This social problem in schools involving the death by student suicide has prompted me to look at how the exposure can affect the professional identity as well as the compassion of a school counselor of color.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. Through their lived experiences, I explored the effects of death by suicide on school counselors 'ability to cope and process the experience of losing a student. This research is unique in that it addresses African American school counselors and their unique perspectives on how suicide has impacted their personal and professional lives.

This study can promote social change as I elicited the perspectives of school counselors of color who have experienced a student's death by suicide. The interviews and data drawn from this research provide an understanding of the experiences and the impact that losing a student to suicide had on the professional and personal life of counselors of color. Clear themes emerged from the interviews with participants related to their experiences after losing a student to suicide. The data from the study affected social change by adding to professional development for school counselors of color, including identifying coping skills, intervention tools, and prevention strategies to help these professionals effectively cope and handle the trauma of a student's suicide.

Research Question

RQ: What are the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have had a student die by suicide?

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) suggested that phenomenological research is aimed at understanding participants lived experiences. Moustakas also contended that Husserl believed that nothing should be assumed or taken for granted when trying to understand a phenomenon. Additionally, he posited that to get to the pure essence of a phenomenon, the researcher must use intentionality, reduction, and bracketing or phenomenological vigilance. For my study, I used bracketing to separate my experiences about suicide from the analysis of qualitative interviews that explore the lived experiences of counselors of color that have been exposed to a student's death by suicide. By doing so, I refrained my own judgements, bias, personal experiences, and assumptions to focus on the analysis of experiences from qualitative interviews about lived experiences counselors of color that have coped with a student's death by suicide. The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study include the analysis of the lived experiences of counselors who have experienced a death of a student by suicide. Another logical connection is the ability to bring another level of understanding to the phenomenon of student suicide by making meaning of experiences and identifying themes connected to the lived experiences of school counselors who have experienced a student's death by suicide. I used transcendental phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of

color who have coped with a student's death by suicide. Guided by a transcendental phenomenological framework, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of counselors of color by examining the meaning and structural essence of how they were impacted by the suicide of a student.

Nature of the Study

Based on my problem statement, purpose, and research questions, a transcendental phenomenological approach was the most appropriate for this study. This approach fit my dissertation topic because it considers the human experiences of counselors who have been impacted and/or affected by the death of a student by suicide. Therefore, transcendental phenomenological research was used to explore the impact of a student's suicide on school counselors. Wertz (2023) stated that the phenomenological research design fits the study's focus on one's experiences and allows the researchers to obtain participants 'reflection and understanding of the presented phenomenon. I conducted semi structured interviews that allowed me to engage in dialogue with participants, which aided in helping to understand the complex phenomenon of losing a student to suicide in an educational setting. The insights gleaned from the interviews helped me identify and understand participant's experiences and the impact on the school counseling profession.

For this transcendental phenomenological study, I used a purposeful sampling strategy, with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Snowball sampling was used by asking participants if they knew anyone who meets the study's inclusion criteria and may have been interested in participating. I used social media to recruit nine participants for

interviews on Zoom. Participants were certified school counselors of color who had experienced student death by suicide in their role as school counselors in K-12 settings. I excluded non-Black and noncertified counselors. I used semi structured interview questions to gather data. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. I transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data to find common themes and meanings using the modified van Kaam method (see Moustakas 1994).

Definitions

I used the following definitions throughout the study:

Burnout: The process of physical and emotional depletion resulting from conditions at work, or more concisely, prolonged job stress. (Lee et al., 2023). Burnout occurs in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job and encompasses exhaustion or the feeling of depletion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness or lack of accomplishment (Leung et al., 2023).

Compassion Fatigue: Reduced empathic response mechanism, essentially the diminished professional purpose of caregiving in the healthcare force. (Hansel et al., 2024)

Counselor of color: Professional school counselors identifying as Black and/or African American.

School Counselor: Certified/licensed educators who improve students' success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2023)

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS): The behavioral and emotional consequences of exposure to traumatic events experienced by significant others. (Leung et al., 2023)

Transcendental Phenomenology: Systematic approach to analyzing data about the lived experiences of participants in research; a design for acquiring and collecting data that explicates the essences of human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004)

Vicarious Trauma: Cumulative transformative effect of working with trauma victims. (Leung et al., 2023). Vicarious trauma is often characterized by symptoms like those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including intrusive thoughts and imagery related to the victim's trauma, emotional numbing, avoidance behaviors, and heightened physiological arousal (Branson, 2019).

Assumptions

I had several associated assumptions in this study. One assumption was that there would be consistent themes based on the experiences of counselors of color who had experienced the death of a student by suicide. Another ontological assumption was that reality is subjective in nature. The standards for school counselors, for instance, could vary from one school to another. Kim and Lambie (2018) reviewed factors contributing to burnout and occupational stress among school counselors, highlighting the diverse and demanding nature of their duties. Additionally, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2021) emphasized that school counselors play a vital role in crisis prevention and response, highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of their professional responsibilities. Thus, the situations that occur in schools often vary across settings and are subjective in nature. This subjectivity could influence developing themes based on how schools and school counselors cope and deal with the death of a student by suicide. Another underlying assumption was that participants openly shared their

experiences regarding the impact of a student's death by suicide and responded to the interview questions with honesty and sincerity.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study involves certified school counselors who identify as African American and have experienced a death of a student by suicide while employed in a school system. I chose this population of counselors because there is limited research as it relates to school counselors of color who have dealt with a death of a student by suicide in an educational setting. School counselors not currently employed were excluded from the study. This included retired school counselors who had not been in practice for over 1 year. School counselors who had not experienced a student's death by suicide were excluded from study as well. Furthermore, school counselors who did not identify as Black or African American were also excluded from the study. Transferability was addressed by providing a thick description of the study methods and findings to provide context. The aim of this study was to identify themes that can help school counselors of color cope, manage, and address the trauma that may occur when coping with a student's suicide.

In this study, there were numerous delimitations. First, I delimited the dissertation topic to the perspectives of school counselors of color in the United States who have experienced a student's death by suicide while employed to explore the impact that the experience had on their work and personal life. The target population was limited to school counselors of colors who have served in an elementary, middle, or high school setting.

Limitations

One limitation of employing a transcendental phenomenological approach is managing researcher bias due to the difficulty of bracketing and setting aside the researcher's own biases and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher's values can impact the data analysis process. Therefore, separating my experiences as a school counselor of color may have impacted the study findings. For instance, participants' race may have impacted reflexivity, so I needed to be mindful of the biases, especially with the topic's personal and sensitive nature. The data analysis process was challenging at times because of the complexity of suicide and the varying perspectives and experiences of participants. Social media was instrumental in helping with recruitment with this specific data set. Snowball sampling helped to mitigate the recruitment process. One final limitation was time commitment which may exclude potential participants due to the commitment of 60 minutes. I addressed these potential limitations by consulting with committee members and processing my own bias by increasing my own awareness of this phenomenon.

Significance

The results of this study provided much needed insight into the perspectives of school counselors of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. Conducting research on counselors of color is essential, as their unique perspectives and culturally responsive practices often contribute to more effective collaboration and intentional engagement (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). These interactions can provide valuable insights that enhance school counselors' ability to support students,

ultimately fostering more inclusive and enriching educational experiences for both students and staff. The insights from the experiences of school counselors of color have helped me identify how these professionals have coped with suicide exposure. Having a better understanding of the overall impact of student suicide exposure may help school counselors of color better function in their role, such as identifying ways to relieve burden and stress after these incidents, including the delegation of responsibilities. In turn, this may help school counselors of color know how to best support students, staff, and teachers. The approaches learned may even help the school community to take care of themselves after the loss of a student to suicide in an educational setting. For instance, a protocol for postvention of suicide or traumatic events can be identified with resources, strategies, and plans to address the needs of all staff members. In this study I explored the impact of dealing with suicide in the workplace to identify ways that school counselors, particularly counselors of color, can be best supported. Finally, this study may bring a sense of awareness to student suicide and provide readers with increased awareness of the effect of the death on school counselors.

Summary

In this chapter, a summary of the impact of suicide was discussed as it relates to school counselors of color. The background of the history of student suicide in school systems was examined through scholarly literature. The purpose as well as the significance of the study was explored. The scope and delimitations were explored as well in this chapter. The study's research question was also proposed in this chapter and the following chapter will highlight literature to help address the research concern for the

study The following chapter gives insight into current literature as well as the problems and/ or concerns that face school counselors who have experienced death by suicide in their career.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter includes research addressing the impact of a client's suicide on counselors, including burnout, compassion fatigue, trauma exposure, and counselor wellness. I also review scholarly literature related to the impact of student suicide in schools from the perspective of professional school counselors. I include background information about the school counselor's role and the implementation of the ASCA National Model. In addition, literature regarding experiences of coping with death by suicide is explored. This chapter also includes literature germane to school counselors of color. The review is intended to provide an overview of the research problem and to identify research gaps related to school counselor of color experiences with a student's death by suicide. The research problem is focused on the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced death by suicide and the impact the death had on the professional identity of the counselor. This research problem was examined through the lens of transcendental phenomenology.

Problem

School counselors have many roles in schools and often work with stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, families, and communities (Mullen et al., 2021). However, the primary task of school counselors is to enhance all students' educational outcomes by supporting their academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary development (ASCA, 2019). School counselors are professionals with specialized training in personal counseling who work in school settings (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Despite the many expectations of counselors, ASCA (2019) called on school

counselors to be leaders in responding before, during, and after a crisis, including suicide. In educational settings, crises involving youth suicide typically place school counselors at the forefront as the primary professionals responsible for responding to such incidents (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 19, highlighting the urgent need for targeted prevention strategies and mental health interventions (Chhabria & Khar, 2023). From a developmental perspective, suicidal ideation is rare before age 10, increases gradually by age 12, and accelerates through age 17. Adolescents and young adults shoulder a significant burden of risk, and a growing number of studies have highlighted the importance of detecting and monitoring suicide clusters that emerge from either social (person-to-person) or shared contextual exposure (Sugg et al., 2022). Poland et al. (2019) suggested that the suicide of a student can lead to contagion as it often leads to a rippling effect on the school environment as well as the greater community~~,~~ because research has found that a single adolescent death by suicide increases the risk of additional suicides.

Given the increasing prevalence of suicide among school-aged youth, it is likely that school counselors will encounter a student's death by suicide during their careers (Stickl Haugen, Waalkes, & Lambie, 2021). Therefore, educational settings are a critical context for youth suicide prevention. Schools are the ubiquitous institutional context serving school aged preteens and adolescents (Williams et.al., 2022). The rising trend of youth suicide highlights the necessity for comprehensive knowledge and guidance on school-based postvention strategies, as schools are pivotal settings for implementing interventions that support students and mitigate further risk (Williams et al., 2022).

ASCA (2019) suggested that over the past several decades, scholars have identified the significant impact that a death by suicide can have on survivors, including helping professionals. Mental health professionals exposed to suicide may question their professional judgment, which some report causes a loss of self-esteem and an increase in intrusive thoughts (Becnel et.al., 2021). Despite this, few studies have investigated the impact a student's suicide may have on school counselors, especially school counselors of color. Due to this gap in the scholarly literature, the examination of school counselors ' exposure to a student's death by suicide is needed, given the prevalence of youth suicide and the critical role that school counselors play in youth suicide prevention and crisis response (Becnel et.al., 2021). As the needs of the student population change and evolve, so do training requirements (Christianson & Everall, 2008). School counselors play a vital role in helping to identify students at risk of suicide (Gallo & Wachter Morris, 2022). These professionals often have established relationships with students and serve students who experience suicidal thoughts.

The social problem that I addressed in this study was how the exposure to a student's death by suicide can affect the professional identity of a school counselor. The research problem that prompted this transcendental phenomenological study was the fact that exposure to death by suicide has been explored in the scholarly literature, including the impact on mental health caretakers, but limited research has been conducted on the impact on school counselors, specifically school counselors of color. Regardless of how well-trained a school counselor may be or the level at which they practice, losing clients to suicide is complex and is often experienced on both a personal and professional level

(Christianson & Overall, 2008). Aside from family, school personnel such as counselors and teachers have the most contact with children during their formative years, which places counselors in a unique position to address the mental health needs of students (Christianson & Everall, 2008). School counselors typically engage in multiple counseling relationships with students because they are mandated to provide students with personal, social, and emotional support.

Literature Search Strategies

Electronic databases were accessed and explored through the Walden University Library to facilitate a literature review with relevant and recent work on suicide related to the experiences of school counselors who have experienced a student's death by suicide. The Walden University Library was searched using keywords including *suicide, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout, psychological distress, wellness, stress, African American, coping, fatigue,* and *occupational stress*. Research Gate and Google Scholar were also used to facilitate a literature review with relevant and recent work on suicide related to school counselors and coping with suicide. The Walden University Library was my primary source for peer-reviewed research articles. Through the Walden Library, I had access to Sage Journals and the Thoreau multi-database search engine.

Transcendental Phenomenological Framework

In this qualitative study, the transcendental phenomenological framework was used to explore the lived experiences of counselors of color who experienced a student's death by suicide. I explored these experiences using semi-structured individual interviews. The findings have increased awareness in the counseling profession and

educational settings for school counselors of color. More specifically, the findings could provide insight into the experience of school counselors of color when coping with student suicides. This transcendental phenomenological framework is grounded in exploring the content and impact of lived experiences, capturing the essence of how professional school counselors are affected by student death by suicide within educational settings.

Phenomenology is a method used to study consciousness that does not involve doubt or disbelief of natural science or any denial of realities independent of consciousness (Wertz, 2023). This approach requires adopting a different attitude, vocational focus, and methods suited to the study of experience. Furthermore, phenomenology is an examination of lived experiences. This framework was used to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced a student's death by suicide. Moustakas (1994) contended that transcendental phenomenology is a science of pure possibilities carried out with systematic concreteness. Furthermore, to obtain the essence of a phenomenon, intentionality, reduction, and bracketing should be used. When conducting this study, I used bracketing to separate my experiences of student suicide from the analysis of qualitative interviews that explored the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have been exposed to a student's suicide. I refrained from inserting my judgments, bias, subjective experiences, and assumptions to focus on the analysis of participants 'lived experiences. I suspended my assumptions and biases and engaged in reflexivity by keeping a reflexive

journal. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to engage in member checking by reviewing the study's results.

The aim with transcendental phenomenology is to describe the essence of participants 'experiences and to amplify their voices (Moustakas, 1994). Through my data analysis process, I identified themes to describe the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced a student's death by suicide. The modified van Kaam method of data analysis was used and included horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering, thematizing, and constructing for meaning (see Moustakas, 1994).

History and Background of School Counselors

School counseling is a professional service provided within the school and intended to promote the functioning and mental well-being of students and educational staff (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). According to Sabella (2006), the field of school counseling cannot progress without a commitment to professional inquiry and reflective practice. It is through such inquiry that school counselors can critically examine their evolving responsibilities, contribute to evidence-based practices, and ensure their work remains responsive to the changing needs of students and school communities. Namely, counselors must advance students 'well-being in the educational organization while supporting all other elements in the system (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). School counselors are expected to serve in multifaceted roles that span a wide range of responsibilities, both within the school and in collaboration with families, communities, and outside agencies. These roles often involve addressing the needs of diverse student

populations while simultaneously managing academic, social-emotional, and crisis-related concerns.

Accountability and effectiveness related to student success matter for a wide range of student outcomes, especially with educational attainment (Mulhern, 2020). With the increasing need for accountability and self-identity came with the emergence and increasing adaptation of the ASCA National Model that has stirred a new wave of excitement around outcome research and has provided a framework for school counseling programs. The ASCA framework helps school counselors practice with greater intention and increased clarity, which helps drive important decisions using data (Sabella, 2004).

School counselors serve as both educators and mental health professionals, supporting student success by promoting academic achievement, fostering emotional development, enhancing social skills, and providing guidance across three core developmental domains (ASCA, 2019). The early American school counseling or guidance programs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were educational experiences woven within the school curricula as courses or units within courses designed to accomplish goals related to enhancing the moral development of students, helping to make students employable with suitable employment after schooling, and responding to their individual differences (Baker, 2011). However, the counseling movement began around the turn of the 20th century and focused on vocational guidance, which then became more concerned with students ’psychological adjustment and personal problems (Gysbers, n.d.). Professionally trained guidance personnel reached many students with

vocational guidance, but their mental health needs were not directly addressed until the middle of the 20th century (Wingfield et al., 2010).

School Counselors of Color

Much attention has been given to racial diversity in the workplace (Shinew & Hibbler, 2002). This aspect is important because, in an educational setting, teachers' racial and ethnic diversity has been shown to play a significant role in shaping school practices and positively influencing students ’academic and social outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Diversity enhances decision-making, problem-solving, and creativity by introducing various perspectives and approaches (Hundschell et al., 2022). Diversifying the teacher workforce is considered a promising strategy to address inequalities and discrimination in U.S. public schools, as students of color often benefit from having teachers who share their racial or ethnic background (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). The role of professional school counselors has evolved to be more responsive to changing student demographics, including increased racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, necessitating the implementation of culturally sustaining practices within school counseling programs (Olsen et al., 2024). Regarding the demographics of practicing school counselors, the ASCA (2019) found that 10% of respondents identified as Black or African American, and these school counselors have different needs than their colleagues.

According to data from the ASCA (2021), approximately 87% of school counselors identify as female, with only 10% identifying as Black or African American. Although diversity can refer to physical, social, and/or psychological constructs, racial-

ethnic diversity remains a sensitive topic in contemporary culture. The professional experiences of Black school counselors are often shaped by the cultural and institutional dynamics within educational settings. These counselors frequently navigate predominantly white school environments where they may be among the few, or the only, Black professionals on staff. As a result, they often face heightened expectations to prove their competence and commitment. Within this context, Black school counselors may experience an increased internal drive to work harder and excel, a phenomenon that stems from both societal pressures and the lived reality of underrepresentation in their workplaces. Black counselors have reported feelings of devaluation, tokenism, and isolation. This is concerning as research indicates that the loss of any educator of color is a loss to the students, as all students benefit from knowing educators and school counselors of color. There are clear benefits of working with black therapists that include a shared culture and cultural solidarity with clients. (Shell et al., 2021).

Mental Health in Schools

Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing how individuals think, feel, and act, as well as how they manage stress, relate to others, and make decisions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. School mental health has become increasingly vital as the rates of child and adolescent mental health issues have risen nationwide. Research indicates that while various educational professionals—including education directors, school administrators, school counselors, and educational psychologists—play crucial roles in student suicide

prevention, particular emphasis is placed on the significance of teacher-student relationships. Teachers, being on the front lines of education, are uniquely positioned to observe behavioral changes and warning signs, making them essential contributors to early identification and intervention efforts in suicide prevention (Reinke et al., 2011). Students often experience significant stress due to academic pressures and personal life challenges. School counselors play a crucial role in helping students manage this stress by providing support and teaching coping strategies to navigate daily life within the school setting (ASCA, n.d.). Schools serve as a natural and influential platform for intervention due to the substantial portion of the day that students spend in school, opportunities to interact with mental health professionals, and ethical and legal responsibilities of schools to provide a safe environment (Hockey et al., 2021). Schools have a unique opportunity to provide continued monitoring, care, and follow-up to students (Hockey et al., 2021). Research indicates that schools play a pivotal role in providing safety, conducting mental health assessments, and delivering interventions, thereby serving as critical settings for mental health support services, especially during times of crisis (Wiedermann et al., 2023). However, teachers are the personnel in the school system spending most of the time with students, providing both formal and informal education to students every day, and having the greatest opportunity to bridge communication between the school and parents. While this communication role often falls on teachers, the responsibility of addressing complex mental health concerns is frequently redirected to school counselors. With an increased workload of suicide in a school, school counselors are often asked to lead the school without clear coordination

and/or plan which can lead to increased role ambiguity, heavier caseloads, and heightened stress for counselors. This overlapping of responsibilities can create strain not only in the classroom but throughout the school system (Buchanan & Harris, 2014). To help address suicide concerns, teachers can collaborate with counselors, and school counselors can support this partnership by providing guidance through professional development policies and programs.

Mental Health Disorders in Schools

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, approximately one in six U.S. youth aged 6–17 experience a mental health disorder each year, with about 8% meeting the criteria for major depression (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.). Mental health difficulties are prevalent in children and young people and significantly affect the student's learning experiences, with children and young people from rural and regional areas experiencing poorer mental health outcomes than their metropolitan peers (Perkins et al., 2021). The mental health of students is an increasing concern for not only school counselors but everyone in the community (Wingfield et al., 2010). A positive and supportive school environment is essential for fostering students' mental well-being and reducing risk behaviors, including substance use, through comprehensive and coordinated educational strategies (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

Influences of Suicide in Education

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are typically the result of complex interactions among biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors, as recognized by most contemporary theories of suicide (O'Connor & Nock, 2014). Young children

exposed to trauma often experience significant social-emotional difficulties, including impaired planning, problem-solving, and emotional regulation skills. Consequently, fostering safe environments and nurturing relationships is critical for their development (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017). It is noted in research that schools are increasingly recognized as essential to address suicide risk and engage in youth suicide prevention since children and youth spend more of their time in school settings, where the interventions provided in school settings are critical approaches to address youth suicide and support students (Stickl Haugen et.al., 2023)

Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Plan

Suicide postvention is recognized as a vital component of comprehensive suicide prevention programs and plays a critical role in reducing the risk of suicide contagion within school communities (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.). School connectedness is widely recognized as a significant predictor of positive student outcomes, reflecting students' belief that adults and peers in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.). In addition, lack of school connectedness was found to be associated with suicidal ideations. School connectedness is a proxy measure of belongingness, which may buffer the effects of either cyberbullying or victimization on suicide risk. Schools are ideal places for prevention activities because students are already in an environment where they are interacting with their peers and learning is taking place (Gallo et al. 2022). It is important for adults, including school counselors, to know the warning signs of depression and suicide and to be ready to discuss these issues with young people.

Informal peer support, including encouragement and understanding from friends and acquaintances, has been shown to play a valuable role in enhancing mental health and well-being within educational environments (Simmons et.al., 2023).

Mental Health of School Counselors

School counselors who have experienced a death of a student by suicide have noted that it is difficult to navigate situations such as suicide in the school, especially with a lack of support from other staff members (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Although the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019) advocates for school counselors to assume leadership roles in all phases of crisis response, there is limited research on how student suicides specifically impact these professionals. Studies indicate that many school counselors feel underprepared to manage the emotional and professional challenges following such events, often experiencing increased stress and diminished self-efficacy. Children and adolescents spend significant amounts of time at school, making school counselors the primary suicide and risk assessors for this population, which in turn makes school counselors more likely to assess youth for suicide risk than any other mental health professionals (Becnel et al. 2021). With the growing mental health concerns among school-aged children, school counselors are becoming increasingly responsible for providing mental health services to the student body (Christianson & Everall, 2008). However, school counselors can face multiple and competing demands, leading to symptoms of stress, empathy fatigue, emotional exhaustion, counselor impairment, and eventual departure or resignation from their jobs (Mullen et al., 2018).

Capacity as a School Counselor

School counselors have many roles within schools and often work with many stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, families, and communities (ASCA, 2019). School counselors are also expected to provide effective services to their students, promoting their social/emotional, academic, and career development, but at times, due to inconsistencies between job expectations and school counseling practice, school counselors suffer from stress and burnout, which negatively influences their job satisfaction (Mullen et al., 2017). Research suggests that the traits that make mental health therapists effective with clients also place therapists at risk for negative psychological, emotional, or financial outcomes (i.e. empathy, care, and compassion) (Shell et.al., 2021). Organizations have a dual responsibility to ensure that counselors can remain in the field and that clients receive high-quality professional support (Long, 2020). School counselors often face multiple and competing demands, leading to symptoms of stress, empathy, fatigue, emotional exhaustion, counselor impairment, and eventual departure or resignation from their jobs (Mullen et al., 2017). School counselors face rising job demands that can be difficult to balance, leading them to feel overwhelmed in their work environment and to lack time to provide direct services to students along with the pressure of job overload and conflicts in roles (Bardhoshi et al., 2014).

Mental health professionals working with traumatized clients may experience emotional consequences due to their therapeutic engagements, a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002). Vicarious trauma (VT), compassion fatigue, and

secondary traumatic stress (STS) are psychological conditions that can arise in professionals due to indirect exposure to the traumatic experiences of others, often through empathetic engagement in therapeutic or supportive roles. These conditions are characterized by symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, including intrusive thoughts, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished capacity for empathy. Such effects are prevalent among mental health professionals, social workers, and other caregivers who work closely with trauma survivors (Hensel et al., 2015). Like secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue is primarily conceptualized as a response to the emotional impact of engaging with others ’traumatic experiences through sustained interpersonal interactions (Thompson et al., 2014).

Vicarious Trauma

VT describes the cumulative transformative effect of working with trauma victims (Leung et al., 2023). Research suggests that beyond conducting suicide risk assessments and addressing suicide-related behaviors, crisis counselors may also be affected by vicarious trauma resulting from repeated exposure to the suicide-related narratives of those they support (Hawgood et al., 2022). Mental health professionals are at risk of experiencing this type of trauma and burnout as a consequence of the nature of their work (Kounenou et al., 2023). Vicarious trauma involves pervasive, long-lasting shifts in the worker’s inner experiences, resulting in altered psychological needs and world beliefs (of safety, intimacy, and control (Leung et al., 2023).

Secondary Traumatic Stress

STS refers to the behavioral and emotional consequences of exposure to traumatic events experienced by others (Leung et al., 2023). STS is common among child welfare and mental health professionals regularly exposed to stories and images of their clients ' traumatic experiences (Strolin-Goltzman et.al., 2024). STS and VT are contributors to compassion fatigue, in which witnessing or hearing traumatic experiences can directly impact on the professional's mental health and overall well-being (Hansel et al., 2024). Counselors are called to be intentional about pursuing personal and professional behaviors that empower them to enjoy their work experiences more fully (Litam et al., 2021)

Compassion Fatigue

Whether working in mental health agencies, schools, or hospitals, counselors may experience compassion fatigue due to exposure to large caseloads, painful stories, and lack of support and resources (Can & Watson, 2019). Understanding how contextual factors may contribute to compassion fatigue can help address a continuing challenge for counselors working to protect their own well-being while providing excellent care (Thompson et al., 2014). Furthermore, despite the exposure, counselors are expected to place their personal feelings aside and provide the best treatment possible in response to the presenting issues and needs of their clients. Even with the death of a student in an educational setting, school staff are at the frontline, having to manage the crisis, and at times, they are not considered among those who are impacted by the death and need support (Tiech Fire et al., 2022). Regardless of how well-trained clinicians may be or the

setting in which they practice, losing clients is difficult and is often experienced on both a personal and professional level (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Research with mental health professionals has evidenced the psychological impact of exposure to and engagement with client self-disclosures of experienced trauma and distress, which could have profound psychological effects that can be disruptive and painful for the helper (Hawgood et al, 2022). Compassion fatigue is common among counselors who are exposed to the ongoing distress, crisis, and trauma of students and families. Delivering services to individuals impacted by trauma can pose a substantial occupational risk for school counselors, potentially compromising their mental and physical well-being and contributing to conditions such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 2002). It seems that working with students who are dealing with suicide would constitute ongoing distress and crisis.

Burnout

It is just as important to identify factors contributing to burnout to better support and promote school counselors ’ability to support students ’well-being (Fye et al., 2020). Counselors who experience burnout exhibit increased inflexibility, distancing themselves from clients and/or students, and disbelief in the effectiveness of treatment/counseling services. Research also suggests that burnout constitutes a stable, negative, work-related mental state of “normal” individuals, primarily characterized by exhaustion, and accompanied by stress, reduced effectiveness, and motivation, as well as the development of dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors at work (Kounenou et al., 2023). As burnout intensifies, mental health professionals may experience a growing sense of helplessness

and despair, which can manifest in diminished motivation, emotional detachment, and a cynical or indifferent attitude toward their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Clinicians experiencing burnout may find that they become ineffective helpers unless they seek services for themselves.

Impact of Student Suicide on Mental Health Professionals in School Settings

School counselors are expected to be trained in identifying students at risk for emotional distress and suicidal ideation as part of their professional role in promoting student well-being (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2021). A student's suicide creates extensive circles of vulnerability, not only among the student's family members but also among their classmates, guides, teachers, and other acquaintances (Tiech Fire et al., 2022). Research suggests that counselors who have experienced death by suicide have reported low mood, a sense of guilt or responsibility, and preoccupation with the incident as personal impacts (Becnel et al., 2021). When counselors listen to their clients 'fears, pain, and suggestions, they can feel similar emotions as a result (Can & Watson, 2019). When counselors do not process their experiences of client suicide in a healthy way, they may find their professional work unfulfilling, unsatisfying, and compromised in addition to feeling the personal impact of the loss with feelings such as shock, guilt, and overwhelming grief with mourning (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Within the mourning process, it is important to note that balancing self-care and client care can be a challenge for many counselors, which can cause some to be vulnerable to several issues, such as increased anxiety, distress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. In the

immediate aftermath of a client's suicide, mental health professionals often experience emotions such as shock, disbelief, confusion, and denial (Ferracioli et al., 2023).

Mental health professionals often question their professional judgment following exposure to suicide (Becnel et al., 2021). It is imperative to explore school counselor self-efficacy in the aftermath of a student suicide because that will help determine judgments of their ability to provide counseling to their clients after exposure to trauma (Becnel et al., 2021). Considering that a death by suicide can cause mental health professionals to experience trauma, a sense of failure, or doubt their professional competency, exploration of school counselors ’self-efficacy may be necessary. Counselor self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to effectively engage in counseling tasks, significantly influencing their approach to client interactions and persistence in therapeutic processes (Hunsmann et al., 2024).

Mental health providers, including social workers, counselors, nurses, psychologists, and psychiatrists, frequently encounter clients who express suicidal ideation, attempt suicide, or die by suicide during their professional careers (Jupina et al., 2024). Due to this, professionals most often report sadness, shock, and even feeling traumatized. Emotional reactions when treating clients with suicide ideations can include feelings of anxiety, distress, excessive worry, hopelessness, powerlessness, and sadness (Levy et al., 2019). In addition to therapists feeling responsible for making the right treatment decision for someone else’s life, they have also reported experiencing stress and anxiety about whether those decisions could result in lawsuits.

The long-term impact of client suicide on mental health professionals is profound. The emotional consequences may include depressive rumination, increased feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, increased feelings of aloneness and isolation from peers, increased sensitivity to signs of suicidal risk, increased concerns over one competence to treat, as well as increased feelings of anxiety of helplessness when doing so (Van der Hallen & Godor,2024). However, the way professionals respond may depend on their level of crisis training. (Tiech Fire et al., 2022). Those with specialized training in managing crises may cope differently from those without, underscoring the need for preparation. Additionally, it is reported that with suicide exposure, there is an identified heightened awareness of suicide risk, more professional caution around suicide, and counselors seeking additional training (Becnel et al., 2021).

Summary and Conclusions

School counselors are both trained educators and mental health professionals who promote student success by supporting academic achievement, fostering emotional development, enhancing interpersonal skills, and delivering services across three core domains: academic, career, and social/emotional development (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). School counselors are also front-line school personnel required to respond when a suicide occurs (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Research suggests that suicide continues to be a growing concern for young people in the United States (Becnel et al., 2021). Many studies have explored how counselors cope with occupational stressors, but there is a gap in the literature specific to the lived experiences of school counselors of color coping with the death of a student by suicide.

School counselors who have experienced a death of a student by suicide have noted that it is difficult to navigate situations, such as suicide in the school, especially with a lack of support from other staff members (Christianson & Everall, 2008). School counselors have many roles within schools and often work with stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, families, and communities (Mullen et al., 2021). At times, school counselors of color may be expected to embrace tragedy with stride while being there for others, despite the lack of support in times of crisis. There may be times when counselors of color are expected to be strong, resilient, and able to face difficulties in stride without embracing the balance of work, personal life, and the need for boundaries. Many school counselors experience burnout due to job responsibilities, and additional factors such as incompetence, devaluation, role conflicts, role ambiguity, incongruence, and lack of professional efficacy further contribute to this burnout (Fye et al., 2020). While some studies may illuminate the adverse effects of suicide in schools, many studies still have not been able to identify how counselors of color have been able to cope with occupational trauma and stress that relates to suicides in school settings or suicide in general.

In this chapter, I addressed the problem, the literature search strategies, and the conceptual framework. Then, I reviewed the history and background of school counselors. Next, I reviewed the literature on mental health in schools, including the influences of suicide in education and comprehensive suicide prevention planning. Following that, I addressed the mental health of school counselors, including their capacity, STS, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Finally, I addressed the impact of

student suicide on mental health professionals in school settings. In Chapter 3, I will provide the methodology for how I conducted this qualitative research study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to explore how counselors of color experience a student's death by suicide. Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10 to 34 in the United States, underscoring the urgent need for targeted prevention and intervention strategies (CDC, 2024). The ASCA (2021) suggested that over the past several decades, scholars have identified the significant impact that a death by suicide can have on survivors, including helping professionals, but few studies have investigated the impact on school counselors, particularly school counselors of color. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to seek and understand how school counselors of color cope with the loss of a student by suicide in their workplace, to delineate the process of coping strategies and its impact on their work-life balance, and to describe how they interpret their experiences.

In this chapter, I describe the methodology and research design. I offer a description of the participants, the ethical protection of participants, and the data collection effort. Interview procedures and my role as the interviewer are also discussed. Finally, I address methods of data analysis, including coding and credibility procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

In this qualitative research study, school counselors are the focus. These professionals work in school settings and have specialized training in counseling with an emphasis on school counseling. In educational settings, school counselors are usually the front-line school personnel required to respond to youth suicide (Christianson & Everall, 2008). Youth suicide is an increasing concern in the United States, and with the

prevalence of suicide, it is likely that school counselors will work with students experiencing suicidal ideations or actions. The concern of suicide is a difficult topic to broach with administrators, faculty, parents, and students, and many educators and/or counselors are uncomfortable with the topic due to mental health stigma (Wiley, 2012). Many counselors and educators feel ill-equipped in prevention and intervention techniques that directly address the alarming subject of suicide (Wiley, 2012). Adding to these challenges, researchers have examined the relationships among burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and race related stress, with findings indicating that race-related stress significantly predicted burnout and secondary traumatic stress for black mental health therapists (Shell et al., 2021). Despite this, there is still little research on the intersection of student suicide and its impact on school counselors of color. It is important to consider counselors of color because black therapists are at a higher risk of burnout and STS than their counterparts (Shell et al., 2023). Thus, potentially placing counselors of color at risk of adverse consequences of psychological and physical health and negatively impacting counseling efficacy, workplace efficacy, and retention. (Shell et al., 2023).

The chosen research design for this study was phenomenology since this methodological approach focuses on investigating lived experiences from the perspectives of school counselors to provide insights while avoiding assumptions or any preconceptions. As noted by Becnel et al. (2021), given the prevalence of youth suicide and the critical role that school counselors play in suicide prevention and crisis response, it is imperative to explore the lived experiences of counselors who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. There is limited research relating to this phenomenon

within the context of counselors of color. This is important because suicide continues to be a growing concern in the United States, and the compassion fatigue that counselors experience can be overwhelming and make an impact on a personal and professional level. Studies have shown that black therapists can be more likely to experience burnout, and they may find it harder to cope in their personal lives and in professional settings when they experience trauma in the work environment (Shell et al., 2021). I addressed this phenomenon through my research question: What are the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have had a student die by suicide?

Within a qualitative framework, phenomenology requires that researchers focus on the first-person perspective and lived experiences within their environment (Dodgson, 2023). For this phenomenological study, I conducted semi structured interviews, which allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's feelings, thoughts, and beliefs as they relate to their experiences of dealing/coping with student death by suicide in a workplace. Using a qualitative method was the best approach to exploring this phenomenon because the open-ended questions allowed the participants to provide answers that provided me with more context and insight into their experiences. This research approach gave me flexibility, allowing themes to emerge organically.

The phenomenological research design focuses on studying people's lived experiences and the participants 'interpretations of their experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). A researcher who conducts a qualitative study using this approach does not assume the experiences of others who have been through a similar ordeal or even assume that they know how the participant experiences the phenomenon that is being studied. A

phenomenological method allows for data to be reported as accurately as possible. Therefore, phenomenology was an appropriate design for this study because I was seeking to understand human experiences and identify themes based on a homogenous group of people in terms of their profession and ethnicity.

Another type of qualitative study that was considered was narrative research design (Caggiano & Weber, 2023). This qualitative research approach considers narratives and imaginaries as tools that can be used to make sense of the world with deep uncertainty (Caggiano & Weber, 2023). This approach was considered because this type of design would allow me to investigate the lives of individuals by telling their own truth through their own stories. This method would have allowed my and they participants' views to be reflected in the research. However, this method was not used because of possible challenges in interpreting the insights of the participant as well as potential bias of subjectivity because the research is not focused on life stories but instead an intended singular aspect of research.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was that of an interviewer and guide. I asked open-ended questions to elicit recorded responses. I used these semistructured, open-ended questions in an interview setting so that the participants in the study could describe the lived experiences of dealing with the death of a student by suicide in an educational setting. During these interviews, I allowed unlimited responses to the interview questions and asked probing questions to encourage deeper thinking and exploration. In this process, I utilized field notes to document observations, experiences, and insights. The

data from the interviews came from both audio recordings from Zoom and handwritten notes. To assist with the data analysis and interview process, a semi structured interview protocol was designed to track questions being asked of participants and provide a place for notes to be taken during the interview. I used the Zoom platform to help transcribe the interviews. This helped me to ensure accurate data capture, support auditability and enhance reflexivity.

Presently, I am a professional school counselor in Georgia. I am a lead counselor at a local middle school and have served in local school systems as an elementary and secondary school counselor. As a middle school counselor, I have experienced the death of students by suicide in my work setting. For this study, I recruited participants of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. However, I did not recruit participants within my school system. I attempted to minimize any interference of my experience with the integrity of the study by looking outside of my current jurisdiction and seeking members who have experienced the phenomena that are apart of organizations such as the Georgia School Counselor Association, ASCA, and Professional School Counselors of Color. In my current position as a school counselor, I have no personal connection to the participants.

As a researcher, there are several areas that I needed to be cognizant of, including providing a space for participants to share intricate details about their lived experiences. I conducted my interviews through the Zoom platform. Using Zoom helped provide a personal interface that aided in helping participants share intricate details of their experiences of losing a student to suicide. I also offered an in-person interview in a local

library if the participant preferred an in-person setting instead of utilizing technology. In this study, I needed to reflect on my own perspectives and work on the elimination of any bias based on my own lived experiences with death by suicide. In doing so and following the recommendations of Creswell (2018) and Moustakas (1994), I engaged in self-reflection throughout the research process to create an open and honest narrative that participants engage with and appreciate.

Methodology

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide information on the intended population for the study with school counselors of color and the logic in participation and sampling strategy. The criteria, recruitment, and ethical procedures are discussed in this section as well. Lastly, the data analysis plan is discussed.

Population

According to the ASCA (2020), only 13% of school counselor educators identify as Black or African American. Children and adolescents spend a significant amount of time at school, which makes school counselors the primary suicide and risk assessors for this population (Becnel, 2021). School counselors lead various projects in the school, and suicide assessment and postvention falls within their role and duties.

Sampling Strategy

To recruit participants for this study, I employed criterion sampling, a form of purposive sampling in which individuals are selected based on predetermined, relevant characteristics aligned with the study's focus. Participants were intentionally chosen for their professional experience and personal knowledge related to the phenomenon of

interest. Eligible participants were professional school counselors who (a) identified as African American, (b) held full certification, and (c) had experienced the loss of a student by suicide while working in a school setting. Individuals were excluded from the study if they were not fully certified, not currently employed in a school counseling role, or serving in administrative positions.

To enhance participant recruitment and identify additional individuals who met the study criteria, I also used snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they knew other qualified counselors who might be willing to participate. This combination of criterion and snowball sampling supported the purposeful and targeted selection of participants with rich, relevant experiences aligned with the study's objectives

Criteria for the Recruitment Process

I recruited nine participants for this qualitative study. Data saturation was met when enough participants were interviewed and information became redundant and repetitive, with no new themes or insights emerging. I knew that my data was saturated when it became clear that further interviews were unlikely to provide additional information for analysis.

Instrumentation

The interview protocol provided a semi structured guideline for the interview process. I also consulted with my committee members to ensure that interview questions formed were comprehensive. The interview guide included demographic and screening

sections. There were also content questions that related to school counselors having experienced a student's death by suicide in a school setting,

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For this study, I did not contact any potential participants until I received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). After I received approval from the IRB, I electronically sent a request for participants, along with the requirements for study participation, to school counselors to provide insight into the study using a listserv and emails from a professional school counselor database. I recruited participants using a social media flyer. I posted the flyer to a Facebook group entitled Professional School Counselors of Color and sent the flyer to the Georgia School Counselor Association. On the flyer, I included contact information for a Walden University representative and myself in case any participant in the study would like to learn more details or speak in private about their rights to participate in the study. An email was sent to interested participants to further explain the purpose, expectations, and criteria to participate in the interview process and study. I addressed any questions or concerns from respondents and proceeded to see if they qualified for study. I interviewed nine participants via Zoom based on their comfort and schedule. The average length of the interview was 60 minutes.

I interviewed the first nine counselors who met the qualifications for this study and responded to the participation invitation. The respondents who accepted the invitation were emailed an informed consent form. This document provided guidelines, expectations, and the rights and responsibilities of the participants. The informed consent

indicated that participants could withdraw from the interview and study at any time. After reviewing the consent form, participants responded via email with the words “I consent” to participate in the study. The data from the interviews with these participants was confidential. I analyzed the transcribed data and assigned pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

During the interviews, I made sure that the participants felt comfortable and respected. At the beginning of the interview, I introduced myself and reviewed the informed consent document. Before the interview commenced, I answered any questions that arose. I assured that the participants knew their rights and responsibilities during the interview and their ability to withdraw from the study at any point. Then, I asked several demographic questions, such as their age and years of experience, followed by the open-ended qualitative interview questions. During the interview, comments were written down based on observations to help explain or clarify the data. A debriefing was offered at the end of the interview where participants were able to ask the researcher questions or discuss any concerns. I thanked them for their willingness to participate in this research. Following the interview, I used a log to document the setting, time, duration, observations made, demographic questionnaire, and Zoom recording. The interviews were transcribed and put into a Qual Coder on the computer for further analysis.

Once I transcribed the recordings, I conducted member checking by offering participants the opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy. No feedback was given during this part of the interviews. Once the data analysis was complete, I also shared the research findings with them to check for the accuracy, validity, and trustworthiness of the

perspectives being shared. This helped ensure clarity of the information being transcribed and receive feedback from the participants. The participants agreed with the accuracy of the information that was shared.

Data Analysis Plan

The first step of the data analysis process included transcribing the semi-structured individual interviews, which involved converting the audio recordings into written form. The interview transcription helped preserve the exact words and terminology of the participant, which helped to reduce bias or misrepresentation of the perceptions being presented in the study. The transcribed files were reviewed for accuracy and relevance by the researcher and participants. I used the modified van Kaam data analysis approach (Moustakas, 1994) to help provide an understanding of the lived experiences associated with dealing with a student's death by suicide. In using this method, I processed all information by reading the transcripts to understand the global meaning of the narratives that were collected during the interview process. I then engaged in horizontalization and, with the research question in mind, I reviewed each transcript and identified all relevant statements by highlighting them. This step allowed me to develop a list of statements and expressions germane to the research question. During the next step of the data analysis process, I engaged in the reduction and elimination of data to identify the invariant constituents. In this step, I used the process of re-reading and analyzing each narrative while identifying expressions or phrases that described some constituents of the experience. I grouped the reduced quotes based on common latent meanings to form themes that represent the core experiences of the participants. I then

used categorization and the thematization of these invariant constituents to develop final themes. In this step, I kept the research question in mind as I checked the identified themes against the interview transcripts. The next step was application and validation, where there was the final identification of invariant constituents and themes. Finally, I constructed textural and structural descriptions of the experience using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes presented in the interview. From the textural-structural descriptions, I developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience of the death of a student by suicide.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is vital to the qualitative research process (Amankwaa, 2016). In qualitative research, the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon by exploring how participants experience, interpret, and make meaning of their lives and social contexts (Kornbluh, 2015). According to Kakar et al. (2023), trustworthiness is the most critical factor influencing the rigor of qualitative research. The trustworthiness of a qualitative research study can be enhanced by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the research design and process (Kakar et al., 2023). These elements and their application in this study are discussed in the following sections.

Credibility

Credibility is one of the four components of trustworthiness. Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant's views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Cope, 2014). One method of promoting credibility and

trustworthiness is through triangulation. Triangulation helps increase the validity, reliability, and legitimation of research findings (Moon, 2019). Triangulation also assists the investigator with reducing bias as it cross-examines the integrity of participants ' responses (Anney, 2014). To help provide credibility of the qualitative research, I recorded the interviews using Zoom. Recording interviews via Zoom enhanced the credibility of the study by ensuring the accurate capture of participants 'responses. This allowed for detailed transcription and facilitated a transparent, rigorous analysis process. The recordings also supported reflexive practice which contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings. Another way I established credibility is to collect data with field notes of the observations that took place during the interviews. Lastly, another strategy that I used was member checking, where participants had the opportunity to review and verify their interview transcript and study results.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions (Cope, 2014). Dependability involves participants evaluating the findings and the study's interpretation and recommendations to ensure they are all supported by the data received from the study informants (Anney, 2014). Dependability can be achieved in qualitative research when an external researcher concurs with the audit trails at each stage of the research process (Cope, 2014). For this study, my dissertation chair acted as my external auditor. Additionally, the replication of a study's results can be assured by using thick description to describe the details of the research process.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represents the participants 'responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). Participants reviewed the research findings via member checking, and thick description was used to provide an explanation of details of the findings. These strategies helped to provide validity and address any potential bias. Additionally, to help with confirmability, triangulation was used to corroborate findings and validate them from different perspectives. This was done by utilizing semi structured interviews and observations to strengthen the credibility of themes and/or findings. I also consulted with my chair and methodologist to ensure that the experiences of counselors who have navigated the suicide of a student were accurately represented.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of research findings to other contexts, which is accomplished through rich, detailed descriptions of the study's setting, participants, and underlying assumptions (Enworo, 2023). To help ensure the transferability of study findings, I provided all participants with adequate details of the study as well as provided a thick description of the methods and/or procedures that were used.

Ethical Procedures

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study before data collection commenced. The IRB is responsible for ensuring that all Walden University research complies with the university's ethical standards as well as U.S.

federal regulations. The IRB's ethics review and approval are required for all Walden-affiliated studies before participant recruitment, data collection, and dataset access. After IRB approval was secured, potential participants were sent an email invitation explaining the purpose of the study to assist in understanding the perspectives of school counselors of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. Potential participants were informed about the requirements for participation, the researcher's role, their role as participants and basic protections of their information. The participants were provided with a formal consent form that required their consent if they decided they would like to engage in an interview as a participant in the qualitative study. If participants became upset or frustrated at any point within the research or interview process, a break was given to allow participants time to gather their thoughts and feelings. If the option was given to break from the interview, I planned on listening to the participants and then asking participants if they still want to participate in the study. Participants were permitted to disengage from the research process at any point. However, this step was not needed in my interviews.

Data Collection Ethics

Ethical considerations were central to the data collection process. I followed a structured interview protocol to build rapport and create a safe, respectful space for participants to share their lived experiences. Participants were purposefully selected who were certified Professional School Counselors of color who had experienced the death of a student by suicide. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, I remained attentive to participants 'emotional well-being and acknowledged the minimal risk involved.

Participants were provided with contact information with a support number if they felt distress from the interview process. To minimize potential bias, I refrained from disclosing personal experiences and avoided recruiting from my personal network. Instead, I collaborated with external counselors and distributed recruitment flyers through appropriate professional channels, maintaining ethical boundaries and promoting the integrity of the research process.

Confidentiality

To help protect participants, I assigned pseudonyms to ensure their identities were kept confidential, and I worked diligently to have all the data from the interviews organized so that the participants are not identifiable. Additionally, interviews were conducted in a safe and secure environment for sharing data. Data collection and data storage was considered an integral part of this research. The data was stored by downloading the audio recording that was later used to aid with transcription of the interviews.

Summary

This chapter describes the study's overall methodology, which is guided by the transcendental phenomenological approach. The research questions explored the perception of school counselors of color that have experienced death of a student by suicide. Criterion sampling was used to identify school counselors that met the inclusion criteria for this study. The phenomenological research design was used to help focus on participants 'experiences and their interpretations of them using interviews. In this chapter, I discussed interviewing as the form of data collection instrumentation and the

protocols I used during the data collection process. I covered recruitment procedures, data collection and analysis. Then, I provided information about issues related to trustworthiness including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Finally, I discussed ethical practices and procedures. By using transcendental phenomenology, I hope to share the impact of student suicide on school counselors of color and how this trauma affects the personal, social, and professional aspects of these professionals. I strived to explore how the professional identity of counselors and their life experiences were impacted by the trauma of experiencing death by of a student suicide. In chapter 4, I discuss the setting of the study, demographics, and attributes of the participants, and the research findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. The issue that prompted me to conduct this study was the concern of the lives lost to suicide and its impact on the community. More specifically, suicide's social impact on counselors of color who have survived the traumatic effect of suicide in their role as school counselors. Through their lived experiences, I explored the impact of death by suicide on school counselors ʾability to cope and process the experience of losing a student. This research is unique in that it addresses African American school counselors and their perspectives as it relates to how suicide has impacted their personal and professional lives. The research question under investigation is, what are the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have had a student die by suicide?

This chapter contains six sections. In the first section, I address the setting and participant demographics. I then review the data collection characteristics, including number of participants, location, frequency, and duration of data collection. The data analysis process, followed by the qualitative data analysis results are next reviewed. The final two sections of Chapter 4 present evidence of trustworthiness as well as a chapter summary.

Setting: Influential Personal or Organizational Conditions

I conducted semi structured interviews via Zoom while I and the respondents were in our homes. During the data collection period, no personal or organizational conditions influenced the participants' experiences that might have affected the

interpretation of the study data. On average the interviews lasted about 60 minutes. At the conclusion of each interview, Zoom provided an audio recording of the interview for transcription.

Participant Demographics

There was a total of nine African American female school counselors in K-12 schools who participated in the study who had experienced at least one student suicide. The years of experience as a school counselor ranged from 10 to 30. All the respondents worked at K-12 schools in the southern United States.

Table 1

Respondent Demographics

Name	Gender	Race	Years of experience in counseling	Grade level of counseling experience
Respondent Fannie	Female	African American	25 years	Middle
Respondent Thelma	Female	African American	17 years	Middle and high
Respondent Louise	Female	African American	18 years	High
Respondent Wanda	Female	African American	30 years	High
Respondent Beverly	Female	African American	17 years	Middle and high
Respondent Tasha	Female	African American	20 years	High
Respondent Wright	Female	African American	10 years	Middle
Respondent Helen	Female	African American	17 years	High
Respondent Carmen	Female	African American	28 years	High

Data Collection

A total of nine respondents participated in the study. The interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing software. The data collection phase of this

study took place between November 2024 and December 2024. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes, ranging from 50 to 70 minutes. I conducted all the interviews, including the screening procedures, such as obtaining informed consent. The first 5 minutes of the interview were spent reviewing and discussing the informed consent form and the study's purpose. After the respondents agreed to participate, I began asking semi structured interview questions. No unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection phase of this study.

The Data Recording Process

All the interviews were conducted via Zoom, and the sessions were audio recorded using the Zoom recorder. After each interview was completed, the audio recordings were downloaded and transcribed. A total of nine interviews were transcribed into a Word document. The text files were imported into Qual Coder (2024) text analytics software. TI used this software to assist with coding the nine interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

There were several steps in the data analysis process, which followed the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). Before the data analysis process began, the text transcripts of the interviews were entered into Qual Coder (2024) text analytics software used for coding. I then applied the first step of van Kaam's data analysis method, horizontalization. During this step, all the expressions pertaining to the lived experiences of processing a student's death by suicide were identified. Next, I engaged in reduction and elimination by identifying invariant constituents and determining if the data adequately represented the phenomenon. The invariant constituents were then

clustered into themes. For example, when a respondent was asked about their experiences with student suicide, one respondent mentioned it was difficult, another stated it was heart-wrenching, and another mentioned it was the worst experience ever. All three statements were clustered because they reflect the same general principle: the experience was challenging.

The fifth step of the data analysis process involved creating textural descriptions, providing a detailed narrative that captures the participant's lived experience (see Moustakas, 1994). These textural descriptions were validated by checking them against the interview transcripts. The sixth step of van Kaam's data analysis approach included the development of structural descriptions to depict the overall experience of each participant based on the textual descriptions and by using imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). In the final step of the data analysis process, I combined the individual textural descriptions with the individual structural descriptions to create a composite description that encapsulates the essence of the participants 'experiences.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the data and interpretations made by the researcher, ensuring that the findings authentically represent participants' lived experiences (Amankwaa, 2016). Strategies used to enhance credibility included data saturation. Saturation occurs when continued data collection no longer yields new themes or insights, indicating that the dataset is sufficiently rich and comprehensive (Fusch & Ness, 2015). During the semi structured interviews, participant responses became

repetitive, indicating that saturation had been reached and data collection ended. Thick and detailed descriptions of the audio contents were also provided to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2018; Leedy Ormord, 2018; Yin, 2018). Next, the study findings were peer-reviewed by a fellow graduate student to support credibility. The study's findings were validated during this review, and the reviewer did not suggest any changes. Finally, the faculty committee reviewed for credibility to help increase the study's validity.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which qualitative research findings can be applied to other contexts or settings. It is supported by providing thick, rich descriptions that enable readers to judge the relevance of the findings to their contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, transferability is limited to counselors of color who work as school counselors in the southeastern United States. Transferability was established by employing thick descriptions of the study methods and findings. Additionally, purposeful sampling was used during recruitment, and detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed, which allow readers to assess the transferability of the study findings to other settings.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and reliability of the research process, ensuring that findings are stable and can be replicated under similar conditions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability was supported by detailing the sampling, data collection, and data analytic procedures. By providing an easy-to-follow process for replicating the study, future attempts to replicate this study will be more

likely to produce the same results. Additionally, triangulation was used to strengthen the dependability of this study. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence with different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection (Creswell, 2018). The researcher triangulated data by examining field notes and transcripts of audiotaped interviews. I also checked the transcripts against the audio recording three times to ensure accuracy. An audit trail was used to enhance dependability by providing a transparent, step-by-step record of the research process, including decisions made during data collection, coding, and analysis. This detailed documentation allows others to trace the researcher's thought process and methodological choices, helping to ensure consistency in the study and reduce potential bias.

Confirmability

Lastly, confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings are shaped by the participants ’experiences and perspectives rather than researcher bias or assumptions. It emphasizes objectivity and neutrality, ensuring that others can trace and corroborate the data and interpretations through a transparent and systematic research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). An audit trail was maintained to enhance confirmability in this study. The audit trail included detailed documentation of all data collection procedures, analytic decisions, and coding processes, thereby enabling external reviewers to examine the methodological integrity of the study. This practice aligns with recommendations for establishing confirmability by creating a clear, organized record that reduces the likelihood of bias or distortion and supports the trustworthiness of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Results

Theme 1: Student Suicide is Extremely Difficult for the Counselor of Color

Seven out of the nine respondents noted that student suicides were exceedingly difficult. For example, Louise commented the following: “It was heart-wrenching. I think I cried for days.” Wanda also stated that “it was one of the most difficult things I had to go through.” Other words used by respondents were “sad” and “traumatizing.” Carmen stated, “It was the most to lose a student by suicide is the most traumatizing event.” Helen noted that all student deaths had the same impact, whether they were suicide, murder, or accidental deaths. She shared,

> So not only have I had to deal with suicide, but I've also had to deal with students being murdered. I have had to deal with students, you know, passing suddenly because of health issues. So, I still see all those same emotions equally, okay, because you've lost a significant student.

This is notable as most counselors of color in this study worked in Title I schools that are in lower-income neighborhoods with higher crime and poorer access to health care.

The degree of difficulty for participants was influenced by the proximity of the counselor to the student who committed suicide. So, the closer the participant was to the student, the more impactful the death was on the participant. For example, Beverly stated, “I had a relationship with the first student. I didn't have a significant relationship with the second one, but with the first one, I did. So, it hurt me that we couldn't do anything.” Similarly, Beverly expressed disappointment that the counseling efforts did not prevent

the suicide. Carmen also noted how a student she counseled who committed suicide had a tremendous impact on her. She stated the following during her interview:

> I remember counseling that student, that particular young lady, multiple times. I can still recall sitting there talking to her. I see her face often. Whenever I do school counseling, especially when it's a student who is having suicidal ideation, I see her. I see her face when I prepare for counselors to do when I prepare my team to do signs of suicide in September, I see her face, and then I recall her name. I have her notes that she wrote me that say, thank you, Ms. Carmen, in a frame because she left a post it note on my door the day before she died by suicide, and it said, "Thank you. Ms. Carmen." It was just like somebody took a knife and was just gutting me because I felt like I failed her, but I could not save her, and she went into a barn and hung herself.

This is another example of how counselors of color expressed intense feelings of being unable to save the student. Fannie concurred and voiced the role that proximity played in the difficulty of the student suicide,

> My youngest daughter was a student at the middle school where I worked, and he was in her homeroom class. I had no idea, so as I tried to comfort and counsel the students, I had to comfort and counsel my own child.

In this instance, the proximity was not to the student who committed suicide but the proximity of her daughter to the student who committed suicide and who attended the same school as her mom, the counselor of color.

Theme 2: Being a Strong Black Woman and Suppression of Feelings

The second theme explores the counselors of color's beliefs about their ethnicity and how they must perform and be seen at work. Despite the emotional difficulty of dealing with student suicides, many participants noted the need to suppress their feelings and be strong Black women. There were several respondents who provided support for this theme.

There appeared to be two main reasons why participants felt they had to suppress their feelings relating to student suicides. The first reason had to do with being prepared to help the students and faculty cope with suicide, and the second reason had to do with being seen as a competent counselor who can do their job, regardless of the conditions. For example, Carmen stated,

> When I walked into the school building, and my AP told me what happened, I just started to scream because it just hurts that bad, but I had to suppress my feelings because I had to prepare to tell the students and immediately get my grief room out.

Helen expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “in the initial, you kind of have to suck it up because you have to be present for the students who are also affected.” Helen continued, “You also just have to get in game mode because, as soon as you walk in the door, it's on.” Wanda’s response further supported this theme, remarking, “Yeah, yes, because it's kind of just putting aside how I felt and being strong for others. I think that's probably the biggest challenge.”

Being seen as strong in the face of student suicide, especially as a counselor of color, was communicated as a necessary sign of strength. Wanda emphatically stated,

> I'm like, never gonna let them see me sweat. I'm never gonna let them see me appear to be weak because I don't want them to think that that's a crack in my foundation as a person, even though it's just me, just being, at least just me having an emotion.

Thelma stated that this model of strength came from women who raised and molded her,

> "Yeah, because I feel like I always have to be a strong person, and I think that's part of our nature. You know, I came from, I come from a very strong-minded group of women in my family, the women who have been in my life, who were mentors for me growing up were very strong-minded leadership roles embedded a lot in my life."

So, it appears that suppressing their emotions is an inherent part of how counselors of color project strength. However, despite the desire to portray strength, sometimes there are "chinks in the armor," as noted by Helen,

> And so, it's like you got to be present, but I have found that I can't, yeah, I'm a sap, right? And so, when kids are talking and sharing stuff, I shed a tear every so often, but I also explained to them that this is human.

There are also unintended consequences of only showing strength outside the workspace. Wright stated, "Can't show weakness. And because I don't think that we as Black women can, women can never, ever have a true opportunity to show our vulnerability, especially not in the workplace, you know".

Theme 3: Self-Reflection After Student Suicide

After the death of the student by suicide, six respondents noted that they engaged in self-reflection. Self-reflection occurred amongst the myriad emotions that counselors of color were experiencing. The self-reflections focused on both the actions of the participants and the processes for identifying and assisting students with suicidal ideation.

Almost all the participants questioned whether there was more that they could have done to prevent the students from committing suicide. This process of repeatedly reflecting on what might have been done differently is not only an act of professional self-evaluation but also reflects the psychological process of grief-based rumination. Rumination involves persistent, repetitive thinking about distressing experiences or emotions, often with no resolution (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). For school counselors of color, these ruminative thoughts were often linked to feelings of self-doubt, responsibility, and helplessness following student suicide. As Thelma shared, “I thought about the previous student and the previous student before them… I question the effectiveness.” These findings align with studies suggesting that while self-reflection can be adaptive, unprocessed grief-based rumination may increase emotional exhaustion and complicate recovery from trauma (Eisma et al., 2020). For some participants, these thoughts prompted internal growth and professional vigilance, while for others, they intensified feelings of self-blame or inadequacy. Although it was based on grief, many participants mentioned self-reflection and asked themselves, “Could I have done more?” For instance, Beverly shared,

> So, it affected me personally because I felt like there was something I could have done I should have done. Maybe it was something I didn't say, or I should have said, or um, so I just kept replaying in my head my conversations and our meetings.

Louise commented, “I did shut down a bit. I did get a little distant. I will say I did. It was a lot of self-reflection. Um, what could I have done differently? How could I have made any changes?” Thelma also discussed their ruminations after several student suicides had occurred,

> I thought about the previous student and the previous student before them. Then the burden again of thinking, and I know we can't save everybody, and I’m not expected to be able to read minds. But again, I question the effectiveness.

Helen also commented on their thoughts after the traumatic event, “[Student Suicide is] Hard, because then you wonder, did you miss something, right?” Fannie concurred and noted that she questioned herself, “I was sad. I was sad in both cases, and I had to self-reflect. Did I miss something?”

In some instances, mainly the ones where the counselor had worked with the student directly, the counselor of color experienced a sense of blame. In this instance, Louise shared that,

> When my superintendent reached out to me to say, you know, to share her condolences, because she knew it was my personal student, she said to me, Ms. Louise, you know, don't put this on you. And I said, you know, that's easy to say when you're not in that position, but as a person in this position, what I can

> honestly say is, if I were not in this environment (affluent White school), I would have definitely done more and said more where I felt comfortable and supported.

However, other participants such as Ms. Wanda engaged in grief-based reflection without self-blame,

> "That was, like, one of the most difficult things that I've ever had to go through, and it was because—not that I felt responsible for it—but there's always that question in the back of my mind: *Could I have? Did I? Why did… Was it something I missed?*"

When these tragic events occur, counselors of color engage in self-reflection, with some blaming themselves and others not doing so. The proximity of the relationship appears to increase the likelihood of self-blaming. However, there are benefits to self-reflection by the counselor of color, as is indicated in a later theme.

Theme 4: Spirituality and Social Networks as Coping Tools

During the period of self-reflection that occurs immediately after the suicide of a student, all counselors of color employed some coping strategies that allowed them to deal with the trauma of the student's suicide. Several different approaches were mentioned in this study. However, most counselors of color relied on some spiritual practice and/or talking with people in their social network.

Most participants indicated that they coped with student suicide by speaking with someone they knew, either a family member, friend, or close colleague. For example, Helen mentioned talking to their spouse of friends, “It's just kind of, you know, talking to

someone, whether it's my spouse or, you know, my best friend, who happens to be the accountant, just to kind of express how I'm feeling about it." Beverly also mentioned talking with their friends as a means of coping. Wanda also mentioned talking to others but relied more on her faith,

> I pray, and then I did, I talked to a couple of, you know, a couple of counselor friends, but, but overall, it's just like my faith in God is, is what really kind of, and I talked to my husband about it. Just overall, that's kind of where I landed.

Thelma explained how she used to talk with others as a means of coping, but also a part of the self-reflection process,

> Being able to talk about it for sure, talking about how the feelings are able to verbalize and, you know, not feeling like I'm making it about me, but being verbalized and talking about those things again, feeling like I'm being an effective person or not…

In addition to Wanda, several other counselors of color shared how they relied on their faith to cope with the tragedy of student suicide. Some used prayer, some mentioned meditation, while others simply relied on their faith in God to help them in their time of grief. Helen responded, "[I] meditate and pray while I'm out there, to just help me be able to be available the way that I should be, but also for me not to take too much on…" Thelma mentioned meditating while going for walks, "I like to walk outside, and that's when I'm kind of in my head, in my head, in my thoughts, and meditate." However, Tasha only mentioned using one means of coping, "For me, just meditation, okay. Meditation." Wanda focused on positive thinking as her way of coping, "Also, the

positivity thoughts, um, place yourself in a positive place where it brings you comfort, that kind of thing."

Theme 5: Counselors of Color Become More Vigilant After Suicide

After the self-reflection that occurs among counselors of color, seven respondents reported that they became more vigilant as counselors and took a more proactive approach to suicide prevention. This new vigilance took many forms. Examples include creating more training for student-teacher programs and being more forceful and confident with the administration as counselors.

The results indicated that this increased vigilance took the form of greater emphasis on student mental health. Wanda stated, "…we do a lot more mental health, a lot more mental health than we probably have in the past." Wanda continued, "We even did a little bit more training with the teachers so that they'll know how to identify the signs a little bit better and know about some drastic changes that take place." Beverly also noted that they implemented suicide prevention workshops regularly for students since the student suicide,

> …every year I went at the beginning of the year and did a suicide prevention workshop from that experience, and I talked to students about how to identify the signs of you know, if one of their friends are struggling, if they are struggling, who to go to, where to go to…

Helen commented that her increased vigilance came in the form of being more proactive and asking more questions. She stated,

> You know, you start asking more questions, not only for the students, but you start asking more questions than[of] your own kids, right? Oh, yeah, I'm good. What makes you good? What was good about your day? Like, tell me about your day.

Thelma also discussed being more proactive after a student suicide, where she preemptively questioned the sister of a young girl whom the counselor of color suspected was having problems. She explained,

> I had another young lady, hers could have definitely ended up in the same direction. But she had an eating disorder, and nobody was picking up on it, and she had a sister at the school. She was two years older than she was, and I was concerned about her, I called her in, and I asked her a question, and she said, Thompson, can I share with you something? And I said yes, and she shared with me what her sister was going through. And ironically, that was the same thought I had.

Even the approach counselors of color take when performing their jobs changes, as noted by Carmen, “So as I'm going through the Columbia, I find myself more mothering and more motherly and softer as I do that, but I'm more thorough, and again, my follow through with the parents are and making sure the parent.” Counselors of color also stated that they were forceful and assertive with the administration. Louise shared,

> I'm going to stop walking on eggshells. I'm no longer going to be passively quiet about things. I'm going to say what needs to be said with a very stern face and mean business about it and require things to happen because I have experience. I

> am a professional, and you need to respect my professional opinion instead of curtailing things because I'm a black woman in this white space, okay, not worrying about my tone, not worrying about the facial expressions that I may have, or the movement of my hands and my body when I talk, No longer am I worried about that.

Carmen concurred with her own example stating,

> I try to explain to the white administrator, you just can't make this announcement over the intercom. It's going to affect the children in a certain way because children of color breathe differently than Caucasian children, you can't just tell children of color that one of their friends passed away. Yeah, you have to. You have to ease into it because they're going to emote differently than Caucasian children.

After the suicide death of a student, counselors of color took a conscientious step to do more and be more as a counselor to try to prevent another student's suicide.

Theme 6: Counselors of Color Are Confident in Their Ability to Address Student Suicides

Despite all the negative effects these counselors experienced related to student suicide, seven noted that they were confident in their ability to address future student suicides. However, some mention that you can never be fully prepared for a student's suicide; the vigilance that develops after self-reflection gives them greater confidence in addressing student suicides. For instance, Louse stated, "…nothing can prepare you for the loss of a student." Additionally, Helen commented, "I don't think you can ever really

prepare, be better prepared, because you never really know how it's gonna affect you." Wright noted that the only thing that could prepare you is experiencing the loss of a student via suicide, "I don't think that anything could have necessarily really prepared me for that. You know, it doesn't matter how many policies you have written unless you go through it." Carmen argues that the level of preparation comes with time. The more you experience this as a counselor, the better you become,

> I think it comes with time. I think you are more prepared when you have more skin and gain, I hate to say it like that, but when you have time as a school counselor, the better you become.

However, a few counselors of color had a different opinion. Some felt that more training would have better prepared them, for example, Beverly stated,

> "[having] something in my school counseling program that dealt with that, that helped us kind of walk through that and just get an idea of the sheer magnitude of emotions and experiences that come with that. So that, and maybe having dealt with it in my practicum, or my internship"

Fannie shared how teacher support could have been beneficial to better preparing for student suicides,

> Teachers [could've helped]. Teacher support. I had a lot of teachers that got into their own grief and did not help with facilitating. You know the kids, that was just teachers understanding grief, teachers understanding suicide, teachers understanding depression, if teachers don't understand all those things, they don't know how to communicate those things to the students.

Despite feeling that nothing could have prepared counselors of color for the tragedy of student suicide, most counselors noted that they were prepared, equipped, and confident to handle student suicides. Helen explained, "…just because of my background, I feel like I still was better prepared than most." Beverly was also confident in her abilities,

> I feel like I am very well equipped to talk to students about it, to have lots of resources still that I can just kind of pull out when I need to. So, I'm very comfortable with addressing it, talking about it, and answering questions about it.

Additionally, Carmen noted that they were comfortable given the growth that came with their experience over time.

> I'm totally comfortable with it. I think a lot of it comes with growth, and a lot of it comes with having to, having to do it all the time. Okay, having been a school counselor for a while, you get used to doing it. It's bad, but that's true.

Beverly noted that she was more comfortable dealing with suicide issues having other counselors around,

> I feel more comfortable when. Yeah, I definitely have fellow counselors working with me, because when you're dealing with students, and even we've had students that have been in car accidents and how it all happens at one time. And you're trying to catch this emotion, catch that emotion. It does become like overwhelming…

Regardless of the circumstances, counselors of color believe they have to be strong and ready, so it is not surprising that most would feel that they are prepared to handle a student suicide crisis.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. The research question under investigation was, what are the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have had a student die by suicide? Nine African American female school counselors in K-12 schools who had experienced at least one student suicide participated in this study.

The results of the qualitative data analysis produced six themes that addressed the research question. The first theme was that student suicide is extremely difficult for counselors of color. The second theme was, being a strong Black woman and suppression of feelings. Many counselors of color noted that it was important for them to show that they could handle the pressure of student suicide so they would not be second-guessed as Black women. The third theme indicated that counselors of color engaged in self-reflection after student suicide. The fourth theme revealed that spirituality and the counselor of color's social network were often used as coping tools. The fifth theme was that counselors of color become more vigilant after suicide, becoming more proactive in creating training for students and teachers, and paying more attention to students ' concerns. Finally, theme six highlighted how counselors of color are confident in their

ability to address student suicide. In chapter 5, I will discuss the study results in the context of the theoretical framework and research literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have experienced the death of a student by suicide. The goal of this research was to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences, emotional impacts, and unique challenges faced by participants in navigating such a profound loss. I found that counselors of color face many challenges after experiencing the death of a student by suicide, including the emotional difficulty of processing and coping with the death. Participants also described a tendency to suppress their feelings, often due to professional expectations or cultural norms, which exacerbated their distress.

Several themes emerged through the process of this qualitative study, including (a) student suicide is extremely difficult for counselors of color, (b) being a strong Black woman and suppression of feelings, (c) rumination and self-reflection, (d) spirituality and social networks as coping tools, (e) counselors of color experience increased hypervigilance after suicide, and (f) counselors of color are confident in their ability to address student suicides. One of the most impactful findings to emerge from this transcendental phenomenological analysis was the significant emotional burden participants experienced as they navigated the trauma of responding to a student's suicide. Several counselors struggled to reconcile their professional responsibilities with the overwhelming demands placed on them following a student suicide, particularly as they navigated the emotional toll of workplace trauma alongside unrealistic work expectations. For example, several school counselors were expected to provide

immediate and ongoing support to grieving students, colleagues, and the broader school community, all while managing their own internal grief. Many participants discussed this dual emotional role as they shared their compassionate recollections of the trauma that they endured. Most participants expressed how this was overwhelming and unsustainable within the typical workload of a school counselor, especially as they experienced their grief and sorrow while engaging and helping others to process their emotional needs. Coping with the grief of losing a student to suicide while supporting others and their emotional needs was a struggle that was noted throughout the interview process. Such accounts align with Moustakas's (1994) emphasis on the intentional relationship between the self and the phenomenon, as participants described how their consciousness was profoundly shaped by the tragedy itself and the expectations placed upon them in its aftermath.

Interpretation of the Findings

Through this qualitative study, several key themes emerged which elucidated the personal and professional perspectives of school counselors of color after experiencing a student's suicide. These themes provide insight into the emotional complexities, professional challenges, and coping mechanisms that shaped their lived experiences. In this section, I explore how the findings of the current study confirm, challenge, or extend existing knowledge within the field.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

Participants consistently expressed how responding to the death of a student by suicide was draining, overwhelming, and emotionally taxing which impacted them

professionally as well as personally. These emotional reactions align with Hawgood et al. (2022), who emphasized that mental health professionals exposed to trauma may suffer significant psychological harm, especially when working within crisis-laden environments. The textural descriptions provided by participants highlighted a wide range of psychological responses, including grief, guilt, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion. Many of these feelings persisted long after the initial crisis had passed. Some participants even found the work demands after experiencing a death of a student by suicide to be psychologically disorienting, while others described it as heavy and traumatizing. As captured in Theme 1, participants described the experience as “heart-wrenching,” “traumatizing,” “sad,” and “the most difficult thing” they had ever experienced in their professional career. Louise “cried for days,” and Carmen described feeling as though she had been “gutted” after losing a student she had personally counseled. The structural elements of their experiences such as the institutional silence around counselor grief, the lack of postvention protocols, and the implicit expectation to "stay strong” compounded their distress. These findings align with prior literature on the emotional burden carried by counselors exposed to trauma, including experiences of vicarious trauma, burnout, psychological distress, and professional disenchantment (Becnel et al., 2021; Kounenou et al., 2023).

These raw emotional reactions reveal the deep psychological toll such tragedies take on school counselors of color, who often carry the emotional weight of both their professional role and personal identity. This distress aligns with prior research on mental health professionals following a client's suicide, as studies have shown that counselors

often experience intense emotions such as guilt, self-doubt, sadness, and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Hendin et al., 2000). For some, the impact can be so severe that it leads to career re-evaluation, diminished professional confidence, or emotional exhaustion (Kalmoe et al., 2019). Furthermore, experiencing primary trauma in the workplace, such as responding to a student's suicide, can intensify counselors' feelings of distress, particularly in relation to their workload demands. Like what is described in the broader scholarly literature, participants in this study reported self-blame, intrusive memories, and emotional numbness—responses that have been categorized as forms of STS, and primary trauma (Leung et al., 2023).

The Strong Black Women and Emotion Suppression

The theme of being a strong Black woman and suppressing one's own feelings while emotionally caring for others highlights the emotional weight and impact that death by suicide has on school counselors. This finding highlights the intersection of racial, gender, and professional identity, revealing how societal expectations can compound the emotional burden for school counselors of color navigating such traumatic events. Participants frequently discussed how the loss of a student by suicide felt as if it were their professional responsibility to help with the aftermath of a student's suicide, viewing it as an expected role within the school setting. Many participants also expressed a need to suppress their emotions while navigating this role, despite the depth of their emotional experiences.

This internal pressure to present strength, even amidst profound grief, was evident in Theme 2. Participants shared sentiments such as "you kind of have to suck it up"

(Helen), “never gonna let them see me sweat” (Wanda), and “I always have to be a strong person” (Thelma). These statements reflect the influence of the *strong black woman* (SBW) stereotype, which demands strength, self-reliance, and emotional restraint from Black women as they shoulder the needs of those around them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Research has shown that while the SBW identity can be a source of resilience, it often comes at a psychological cost. For instance, the SBW identity has been linked to chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and delayed help-seeking behaviors among Black women (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Participants in my study also shared that their roles within the school environment shifted after the crisis, with their roles becoming more expansive and emotionally demanding especially with the added anxiety, depression, and grief that presented following a student’s death by suicide. In the interviews, some participants described feeling more “mothering,” more thorough, and more intentional in their engagement with students. Others noted how their voices grew louder and more assertive in administrative spaces, as they pushed back against systems they perceived as unresponsive or dismissive. This evolution in role was both empowering and exhausting, revealing the blurred boundary between professional identity and emotional labor.

As Corbin et al. (2018) explained, the SBW identity often creates an emotional paradox wherein Black women feel compelled to maintain an image of strength in environments—such as predominantly White institutions—where expressing vulnerability might be misinterpreted as weakness or incompetence. By examining the lived experiences of these school counselors of color through the lens of the SBW schema, it becomes clear that emotional suppression is both a coping mechanism and a

cultural expectation. This dual role renders the emotional labor of Black school counselors invisible and unsustainable, increasing their risk for burnout, compassion fatigue, and long-term psychological distress.

Although the emotional labor of counselors is high, it is important to be cognizant of the multiple responsibilities that counselors deal with daily. School counselors are expected to navigate multiple responsibilities, including crisis response, which can contribute to burnout due to role overload and incongruence (Bardhoshi et al., 2014). In the aftermath of a student's suicide, counselors may experience burnout and compassion fatigue, leading them to suppress their own emotions while supporting others. This is a dynamic that is particularly pronounced among counselors of color.

The expectation to remain composed and suppress trauma without sufficient emotional processing can contribute to *racial battle fatigue* (RBF), a form of psychological and physiological distress experienced by people of color due to prolonged exposure to racial microaggressions and systemic inequities (Smith et al., 2007). Manifestations of RBF include depression, anxiety, frustration, and emotional withdrawal, as well as physical symptoms like headaches and elevated blood pressure (Smith et al., 2007). In educational settings, Black educators often face racial microaggressions and structural inequities, which contribute to increased emotional labor and psychological stress (Kohli, 2018). For school counselors of color, the compounded pressures of managing crisis situations and navigating racialized expectations can exacerbate RBF, making it more challenging to engage in healthy emotional processing or seeking support. Addressing this requires systemic changes, including the

implementation of support structures that acknowledge and mitigate racial stressors, such as safe spaces for processing experiences and professional development focused on cultural competence (Anderson, 2022).

Rumination and Self-Reflection

The experience of losing a student to suicide prompted significant self-reflection among the participants in this study. As outlined in Theme 3, many participants described repeatedly revisiting their actions, questioning their efficacy, and wondering whether the tragedy could have been prevented. While this way of thinking often occurs when tragedies happen, the burnout associated with suppression of one's own personal feelings of grief can cause more emotional stress and patterns of rumination-—a repetitive, passive focus on distress that is cognitively and emotionally draining (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

Rumination theory suggests that individuals often turn inward after traumatic events, repeatedly focusing on the causes and consequences of what occurred (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). For the counselors in this study, this manifested as second-guessing their decisions, replaying their final interactions with the deceased student, and questioning whether they had missed warning signs. One participant described it as "not being able to shut off the 'what ifs 'in my head." This pattern aligns with grief-related rumination, which involves persistent thoughts about the circumstances of the loss, including its meaning, personal responsibility, and perceived preventability, particularly following a suicide (Eisma et al., 2014). Several participants voiced lingering doubts or "what-if" scenarios, questioning whether they could have done more to prevent the

tragedy. One participant shared, “I couldn’t stop replaying everything that happened the week before. I thought, what did I miss?” This type of repetitive thinking is often a natural aspect of the grieving process; however, in the absence of emotional expression and supportive coping mechanisms, it may intensify psychological distress and hinder adaptive adjustment (Kaplow et al., 2012). The effects of rumination may be particularly detrimental when coupled with emotional suppression, a recurring theme identified among participants. Many counselors described not having the space or cultural permission to process their grief openly, which may have intensified their internalized emotional loops. Unresolved grief, when accompanied by persistent rumination, has been shown to elevate the risk of developing depression, anxiety, and symptoms of prolonged grief disorder (Morina et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, not all reflective behaviors were maladaptive. Some participants engaged in journaling, prayer, and quiet reflection as tools for constructive self-reflection, using these practices as motivation for personal growth. This aligns with research indicating that journaling can enhance self-awareness and emotional regulation, contributing to improved mental health outcomes (Koziol, 2021). These moments of reflective meaning-making were often described as spiritually or professionally grounding. The difference between adaptive self-reflection and maladaptive rumination, as demonstrated in the findings, lies in whether participants found a sense of clarity or remained stuck in cyclical self-blame. These findings underscore the need for trauma-informed supervision and culturally responsive grief support for school counselors. Without adequate avenues for emotional expression and guided reflection, grief-based

rumination may become a silent yet chronic barrier to well-being and professional functioning.

Professional Identity and Competency Challenges

As discussed, the findings of this study revealed that experiencing a student's suicide had a profound emotional impact on participants. Findings suggest that the death of a student by suicide extended beyond immediate grief, it disrupted counselors ' perceptions of their roles and raised difficult questions about their professional efficacy and competency. As highlighted in Theme 5, many participants responded to these traumas by becoming more vigilant, revising their practices to proactively address student mental health. These shifts included checking in more frequently with students, leading staff training, and advocating for stronger suicide prevention protocols. While these changes reflected a deep commitment to student and community care, they also came with significant emotional and psychological costs.

Despite their extensive experience, ranging from 10 to 30 years, participants described an emotional disruption that intertwined both deeply personal emotions and their professional duties. Their narratives revealed a complex and, at times, conflicted understanding of who they were expected to be within their roles as school counselors, particularly in the aftermath of tragedy. For several participants, this identity shift was also racialized. As Black women, their professional identities were shaped not only by training and experience, but also by cultural expectations to serve as caretakers, cultural brokers, and emotional anchors for students of color. These additional roles, though rooted in advocacy and care, were frequently invisible to administrators and peers. The

pressure to perform with composure and without vulnerability reflected the internalized burden of the SBW stereotype. As one participant shared, “I’m never gonna let them see me sweat.” Another noted, “I stopped walking on eggshells... because I needed to be respected as a professional.”

Although increased alertness following trauma can serve as a protective mechanism, it can also give way to hypervigilance, a sustained psychological state marked by heightened sensitivity to perceived threats, which can become emotionally unsustainable over time (van der Kolk, 2014). While participants did not explicitly identify as hypervigilant, their accounts reflected quiet emotional fatigue. The continual need to monitor student distress, compounded by their own unresolved grief and experiences of institutional marginalization, placed them at increased risk for burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Closely connected to these emotional impacts were the ongoing challenges to professional identity. Participants described how racial, cultural, and gender expectations often blurred the boundaries of their roles. They were not only seen as school counselors, but also as maternal figures, informal mentors, and cultural liaisons for students of color. While these roles emerged from genuine care, they introduced additional, unacknowledged emotional labor. For example, one participant, Carmen spoke to this shift, explaining how she became “more mothering and more thorough” following a student suicide. Her response reflected both her deep investment in student well-being and the emotional overextension that marked her evolving professional identity.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that student suicide not only disrupts the emotional landscape of school counselors of color, but it also reshapes their professional selves. It sharpens their awareness, deepens their care, and stretches their emotional capacities, sometimes to the point of depletion. These narratives reveal a profound intersection between individual experience and systemic context. Through the lens of transcendental phenomenology, the essence of what it means to be a Black school counselor navigating suicide emerges as one defined by resilience, advocacy, and the persistent negotiation of identity within environments that often overlook their emotional labor. Moving forward, it is imperative that institutions invest in structural support that affirm the dual burdens counselors of color carry. This includes reducing caseloads, providing grief-informed supervision, and integrating professional development that addresses the intersections of race, trauma, and counselor identity. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic change in how schools recognize, validate, and support the emotional and professional realities of counselors of color—particularly in the wake of student tragedy.

Coping Strategies and Resilience

School counselors of color navigate educational environments shaped by systemic inequities and cultural marginalization, which intensify their professional challenges and emotional burden (Washington et al., 2023). Participants in this study articulated a persistent tension between their formal responsibilities and the additional emotional labor required to support students, staff, and the broader school community, particularly in the aftermath of a student suicide. Research indicates that factors such as high caseloads,

extensive administrative duties, and insufficient occupational support are substantial contributors to counselor burnout and professional dissatisfaction (Kim & Lambie, 2018).

Moreover, the absence of culturally responsive training and professional development in suicide prevention may further intensify these challenges. The ASCA (2022) emphasizes the necessity for school counselors to provide culturally responsive mental health services and adhere to protocols that respect the diverse backgrounds of students. However, several participants in this study described limited access to targeted training or postvention resources that address the intersection of race, grief, and trauma, which contributed to feelings of professional isolation and emotional overwhelm. One participant specifically noted the lack of teacher engagement and understanding around grief and suicide, emphasizing that more comprehensive training for teachers could have alleviated some of the burdens shouldered by the counselor alone. This highlights a critical need for systemic change that extends beyond the school counselor, ensuring that all school personnel are adequately prepared to support students and colleagues in the aftermath of suicide.

To address the disproportionate emotional labor shouldered by school counselors, particularly counselors of color, schools must adopt a collaborative, culturally responsive approach to mental health and crisis intervention. This includes equipping not only counselors, but also teachers, administrators, and school staff with trauma-informed and culturally competent training. When counselors are the sole providers of postvention care, their risk for burnout and compassion fatigue increases significantly. Research indicates that school counselors' higher levels of burnout correlate with factors such as

large caseloads, non-counseling duties, and lack of supervision, which can be exacerbated when they are solely responsible for postvention efforts (Kim & Lambie, 2018). Participants in this study noted the lack of institutional and peer support following student suicide, highlighting the need for systemic change that redistributes emotional responsibility and validates the lived experiences of counselors of color.

Implementing culturally responsive practices and distributing crisis response responsibilities among staff are critical strategies for fostering resilience and supporting the mental health of educators in school environments (McCalman et al., 2017). Creating inclusive, equity-driven systems of support not only improves outcomes for students but also sustains the professional longevity of school counselors. Ultimately, investing in school-wide, culturally competent infrastructure is essential to fostering psychologically safe and supportive environments for both counselors and the communities they serve.

Despite these barriers, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, frequently drawing upon culturally grounded and community-based coping strategies to sustain their emotional well-being. One of the most consistently cited sources of strength was spirituality. For many participants, spiritual beliefs and practices served as foundational tools for navigating the emotional toll of student suicide. Faith was described not only as a personal resource but also as a culturally embedded means of meaning-making in the face of profound grief. Spiritual coping strategies including prayer, church involvement, scripture reading, and spiritual reflection were integral to how participants processed loss and maintained emotional balance.

This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting the role of spirituality as a protective factor among Black professionals and communities facing trauma and adversity. Research indicates that spirituality fosters a sense of hope, purpose, and connectedness, which are critical in managing grief and emotional distress. Specifically, for African American women, spiritual coping often intersects with cultural identity, offering both individual comfort and communal affirmation in moments of hardship. In the context of this study, participants ’reliance on spiritual practices reflected both personal conviction and cultural continuity, reinforcing the importance of honoring spiritual dimensions within counselor wellness and postvention support efforts.

This process facilitated participants ’recognition of their own need for support in navigating grief while concurrently fostering resilience that enabled them to continue providing effective care to others. These strategies provided a framework for making sense of tragedy and reaffirmed participants' purpose and calling within their profession. Based on these findings, school and district administrators should consider allowing time and space for counselors to engage in faith-based services or practices as needed. Such accommodations may serve as both a culturally responsive and ethically sound approach to supporting the holistic well-being of school counselors in the aftermath of student suicide.

Social support networks also played a vital role in participants ’ability to cope with grief and cultivate resilience following student suicide. Peer support and collegial friendships offered emotionally safe spaces where these women of color could feel seen, heard, and affirmed. Informal mentorships and trusted professional relationships allowed

participants to process their experiences with individuals who understood the unique cultural and occupational stressors they faced. These interpersonal connections helped mitigate feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion that were often intensified by institutional inaction or inadequate support.

Implementing peer support networks among professionals has been associated with reduced compassion fatigue, enhanced emotional resilience, and increased confidence in professional capabilities (Hunsaker et al., 2015). Additionally, for professionals of color, culturally affirming support systems—both within and outside the workplace—can serve as critical buffers against burnout and vicarious trauma (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Neville et al., 2016). In this study, participants highlighted the essential role of community-based networks in sustaining their mental and emotional well-being, particularly when formal institutional responses were limited or absent.

Systemic Barriers to Support Counselors of Color

Participants in this study described enduring stress related to the daily demands of school counseling, including academic advising, behavioral interventions, and mental health support, all of which intensified following the suicide of a student. For school counselors of color, these responsibilities were further compounded by the weight of racialized expectations, cultural invisibility, and institutional neglect. Most participants reported experiencing heightened emotional alertness and vigilance after a student suicide. While this response often emerged from a desire to protect others, it became emotionally draining over time. This aligns with research indicating that school counselors working under conditions of racial and emotional strain face a higher risk of

burnout and compassion fatigue. Shell et al. (2021) found that race-related stress significantly predicted both burnout and secondary traumatic stress among Black mental health therapists, highlighting the profound impact of systemic racism on the well-being of counselors of color. Despite their experience and preparedness, several participants shared how they received little to no institutional support after the suicide of a student. For instance, Carmen, who had formed a personal bond with the student who died, recalled receiving no structured follow-up or mental health support from her district. Instead, she had to rely on her faith and husband for emotional processing, stating, "I talked to a couple of counselor friends, but overall, it's just like my faith in God… that's kind of where that landed." Similarly, Beverly expressed feeling alone in managing both her grief and that of her students, stating, "I just kept replaying in my head my conversations… it affected me personally." These examples reflect Ayer et al.'s (2023) assertion that school counselors, particularly in under-resourced or culturally disconnected environments, often operate without sufficient postvention systems, leaving them to navigate loss in isolation.

The expectation to remain composed and professional in the face of trauma was evident. Several participants described the need to suppress their emotions to support students and maintain credibility as competent counselors. For instance, Carmen reflected on the immediate aftermath of a student's suicide: "I had to suppress my feelings because I had to prepare to tell the students and immediately get my grief room out." Helen echoed this, stating, "You kind of have to suck it up because you have to be present for the students." These narratives illustrate the conflict between public professionalism and

private grief, which aligns with the literature on emotional suppression among women of color, particularly the SBW schema that reinforces unrealistic expectations of endurance and composure (Donovan & West, 2015).

This emotional burden was intensified by the lack of racially and culturally affirming peer support. Many counselors indicated that they were the only Black or African American counselor in their building or district, which heightened their sense of professional isolation. Louise, for example, remarked that if she had been in a different environment—one in which she felt supported and culturally understood—she would have been more vocal in her response to a student suicide. Fannie described how the absence of teacher involvement following a suicide made her role even more difficult: "I had a lot of teachers that got into their own grief and did not help with facilitating… If teachers don't understand those things, they don't know how to communicate them to the students." These examples support the findings that underrepresentation and isolation in predominantly white institutions can leave counselors of color without safe spaces to express vulnerability or receive affirmation (Washington, Byrd, & Williams, 2023).

Participants also emphasized the emotional disconnect between themselves and their leadership teams. Several noted that their lived experiences—particularly as it related to grief—were often invalidated or minimized. Helen, for instance, expressed that although she was deeply affected, she felt pressure to maintain a strong façade: "You got to be present, but I have found that I'm a sack, right?" One participant described it simply: "There was no space to grieve." These statements align with the literature on racial microaggressions and institutional invalidation, which have been shown to hinder

authentic emotional expression and contribute to feelings of professional invisibility among people of color (Sue et al., 2007).

Taken together, these experiences reveal a complex matrix of systemic barriers, including emotional, institutional, and cultural barriers, that counselors of color face following the suicide of a student. While they are expected to support others with compassion and professionalism, they often do so without sufficient resources, cultural affirmation, or empathetic leadership. As Peters et al. (2020) emphasize, culturally responsive support structures and inclusive leadership practices are essential to sustaining the well-being of counselors of color. Without these systemic changes, the emotional labor they carry will remain unacknowledged and unsustainable. These findings underscore the urgent need for school systems to move beyond crisis response models that focus solely on student support and instead adopt holistic, equity-driven frameworks that affirm and sustain the emotional, cultural, and professional well-being of counselors of color.

Limitations of the Study

As with all qualitative research, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample consisted of nine African American women who were employed as professional school counselors in K–12 educational settings and who had personally experienced the death of a student by suicide. While the study was open to participants of all genders, only women chose to participate. Therefore, the perspectives shared reflect the lived experiences of Black female school counselors and may not capture the nuances of how this phenomenon is

experienced by male counselors or those from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. As such, the transferability of findings is limited and should not be generalized to the broader population of school counselors. Males not participating in this study is a limitation.

The use of transcendental phenomenology guided the research design, with an emphasis on bracketing researcher assumptions and focusing on the essence of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). While this approach allowed for deep exploration of meaning, it also introduced challenges related to the subjectivity of the phenomenon. Suicide is an emotionally complex and highly individualized experience, and participants' perceptions, interpretations, and emotional responses varied widely. These variations, while valuable, may make it more difficult to identify common patterns that apply universally to other professionals in similar roles.

This qualitative study also relied on participants who self-reported data from their own stories that happened during their career. Some of them noted that the suicides of their students happened at various times of their career. The information was gained through interviews utilizing interview protocol. As with all retrospective accounts, participant responses were subject to memory bias and personal interpretation. Some participants may have unintentionally omitted or altered aspects of their experiences over time due to emotional processing or shifting perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Additionally, because of the sensitive and emotionally charged nature of the topic, some participants may have modified their responses, consciously or unconsciously. Another potential limitation is that all semi-structured interviews were conducted via

Zoom while participants and the researcher were in their homes, which may have influenced the depth of participant responses due to concerns about privacy, environmental distractions, or emotional proximity to the setting in which the trauma was discussed.

The depth and richness of data collected were influenced by the quality of the interviews and the emotional readiness of participants to engage with the topic. The researcher employed strategies such as reflective listening, the use of an interview protocol, and creating a supportive, nonjudgmental environment to build rapport and facilitate open dialogue. Participants were given time to process questions and share their stories at their own pace. The researcher allowed pauses for reflection and aimed at providing a safe space for participants to illustrate with words their journey with dealing with death by suicide while employed as a school counselor. These efforts were intended to reduce emotional discomfort and promote honest, meaningful responses. To enhance the credibility and the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the research process (Berger, 2015), used a semi-structured interview guide to maintain consistency, and conducted member checking to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' experiences (Birt et al., 2016). While every effort was made to reduce bias and preserve the integrity of the data, the researcher's positionality and emotional proximity to the topic may have influenced data interpretation which could be a limitation to the study.

Despite these limitations, this study offers important insights into the emotional and professional experiences of Black female school counselors responding to student

suicide. It contributes to the limited but growing body of research on the intersection of race, grief, and professional identity in school counseling, and underscores the need for culturally responsive support and systemic change.

Recommendations

This study highlighted the need for further research to expand the current findings, address research gaps, and provide deeper insight into the experiences of school counselors of color dealing with student suicide. These findings illustrate the value of amplifying the voices of counselors who have been impacted by a student's suicide. It also provided attention to the global concern of suicide today. Suicide is a pressing global public health and social concern, with approximately 800,000 individuals dying by suicide each year worldwide, according to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). Thus, suicide is a concern worldwide. The recommendations for further research aim to expand the current findings of this study to address other research gaps and gain deeper insight into the experiences of school counselors who have faced suicide in their careers.

This study provides only a snapshot of the experiences that counselors have been through when faced with the phenomenon of suicide. Further research should explore the long-term and short-term career effects of experiencing suicide in the workplace with a death by student. Effects such as job retention, burnout, compassion fatigue, and professional identity can be explored. Another recommendation to consider would be the exploration of coping strategies that are used after the death of a student or other crises that occur in the workplace. Future research could explore the development and

effectiveness of professional development programs informed by the lived experiences and recommendations of participants who have navigated student suicide as school counselors of color. Another recommendation for further research is to look beyond just African American population and include counselors from more diverse ethnic/racial backgrounds to explore the professional identity as well as the cultural influences that occur in the workplace as a Professional School Counselor. Comparing school settings such as public, private, and charter schools could be looked at when viewing the vantage point of school counselors that have experienced death by suicide. Exploring the mental health resource access to school districts could be a recommendation for further research.

Implications

Positive Social Change

The potential impact for positive social change includes mental health support for school counselors, promoting cultural competency in school mental health services, strengthening suicide prevention efforts in schools, and addressing the stigma around mental health support for school counselors of color. Positive social change can be achieved by encouraging schools to adopt mental wellness initiatives tailored to counselors, shifting the cultural perception of school counselors, and normalizing self-care and mental health services for counselors (Becnel et al., 2021). Lastly, institutional recognition of the mental and emotional demands placed on school counselors is another way to promote change. Therefore, school-wide mental health initiatives that include counselors as participants, not just providers, could be employed. These efforts could also include teachers, community partners, and administrators.

This study has the potential to contribute to positive social change by highlighting the critical need for systemic emotional, cultural, and institutional support for school counselors of color, particularly in the aftermath of student suicide. When school counselors are emotionally supported and professionally valued, their capacity to provide high-quality mental health services, academic guidance, and social-emotional support to students is significantly enhanced. In this way, promoting the well-being of school counselors is not a peripheral concern, it is foundational to improving outcomes for students and strengthening school communities. This study also contributes to positive social change by promoting cultural competency within school mental health services. Counselors of color often bring lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and relational insight that can enhance how schools serve diverse student populations. However, when their contributions are undervalued and their emotional labor goes unsupported, it limits both their impact and professional sustainability. Encouraging schools to adopt culturally responsive supervision models and invest in the development of counselors of color can promote retention, equity, and better student-counselor engagement.

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invest in the development of counselors of color can promote retention, equity, and better student-counselor engagement.

A critical outcome of this research is the call to address stigma around mental health support for school counselors. Counselors are frequently viewed as the providers of care rather than recipients, which creates an invisible barrier to their own healing. Normalizing self-care, reflective practice, and access to therapy for school counselors, especially in the wake of traumatic events like suicide, can reshape professional culture and make emotional well-being a priority, not a privilege.

Implications for Practice

This study provides several implications for practice that are relevant to school counselors, administrators, counselor educators, and school mental health stakeholders. First, findings suggest that school counselors of color must be encouraged to acknowledge their own grief following student suicide and seek emotional support rather than internalizing the cultural pressure to remain strong for others. School systems should normalize emotional vulnerability and wellness practices among counseling staff, creating spaces for self-reflection, peer support, and restorative practices. Second, the study highlights a pressing need for professional development and culturally responsive training in crisis intervention, grief counseling, and suicide postvention. School counselors must be equipped to support students, families, and staff during times of crisis and protect their own mental and emotional well-being. Training programs should address both clinical competencies and the specific cultural and emotional challenges color counselors of color face.

Furthermore, the study underscores the need for culturally competent supervision and mentorship within school systems. Supervision models should allow counselors of color to process their experiences in supportive and culturally affirming environments. Mentorship from experienced professionals with similar backgrounds may provide emotional validation, guidance, and professional growth.

Lastly, the findings call for a broader reevaluation of the role and responsibilities of school counselors. As school counselors are increasingly called upon to address the emotional crises of students, administrators must consider how expectations for care provision intersect with counselor capacity and well-being. This includes ensuring school counselors are not overburdened and access manageable caseloads and wellness resources.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of school counselors of color who have faced the traumatic reality of student suicide. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, the study captured the emotional, psychological, and professional challenges experienced by these counselors. The findings highlight the intersection of emotional labor, cultural expectations, and professional identity, revealing the unique burden placed on school counselors of color as they navigate the complexities of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention in school settings.

The need for this study was evident due to the limited research on the impact of student suicide on school counselors of color. Given the increasing rates of youth suicide (Reis & Cornell, 2008) and the critical role counselors play in crisis response (Becnel et

al., 2021), it is essential to understand and address the specific barriers, coping mechanisms, and systemic challenges faced by these professionals. The study's findings align with existing literature on burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue (Leung et al., 2023) emphasizing the emotional toll that supporting suicidal students has on counselors.

Systemic inequities, such as the lack of culturally competent peer support, can contribute to educators ’feelings of isolation and heightened professional burden, particularly in diverse school settings (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). Many participants described the pressure to embody the SBW archetype which limited their ability to seek emotional support when dealing with workplace trauma. This study reinforces the need for institutional changes, including structured mental health support for school counselors, culturally competent training programs, and policies that acknowledge the additional emotional labor that Black counselors undertake.

The implications of this study extend beyond the counseling profession, potentially influencing policy, training, and educational leadership. The research highlights the importance of mental health resources, workload adjustments, and professional development opportunities to ensure school counselors can effectively support students while maintaining their well-being. Additionally, the study contributes to positive social change by advocating for greater diversity in school mental health services, reducing stigma around mental health care for counselors, and encouraging systemic improvements in crisis response protocols.

In conclusion, this study fills a crucial gap in the literature by amplifying the voices of counselors of color who have experienced the profound impact of student suicide. By acknowledging the emotional, cultural, and professional challenges they face, this research serves as a call to action for educational institutions, policymakers, and mental health professionals to create more supportive, equitable, and sustainable counseling environments, especially in schools nationwide. The findings pave the way for future research on counselor well-being, racial disparities in school mental health, and the long-term effects of student suicide exposure on professional school counselors.

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Appendix A: Social Media Flyer

Interviewing School Counselors of Color

School Counselors Needed

ABOUT THE STUDY

- This study will explore school counselors of color who have experienced a student's death by suicide while employed as a school counselor.
- For this study, you are invited to describe your role as a school counselor and the impact that suicide has had on your role as a school counselor.

Participant Requirements.

Certified School Counselor

Counselor of Color

Experienced Student Death by Suicide while employed as a school counselor

- Participants engage in a Zoom interview for 60 minutes.
- To protect the privacy of participants, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.

This interview is a part of the doctoral study for Megan Ray, a PhD student at Walden University

Please forward to counselors that meet the participant requirements.

If you are interested in this study, please contact Megan by email, or phone.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Qualitative Interview Questions

1. Please describe your role as a school counselor. a. Can you describe your experiences as a counselor of color working within the school system?

2. Describe what it was like to lose a student to suicide.

a. How did your identity as a counselor of color shape your experience of this loss, if at all?

3. How did this event affect you emotionally?

a. How did this suicide affect your role as a school counselor, particularly as a counselor of color?

b. How did this suicide affect you personally?

4. What was the most difficult aspect for you when you received the news of the loss of a student by suicide? a. Were there any unique challenges or pressures you faced as a counselor of color during this time?

5. What are some long-term emotional consequences that you have experienced, if any, after losing a student to suicide? a. Have you felt that your experiences as a counselor of color impacted the way you navigate or carry these emotional consequences?

6. What was your role as a counselor when dealing with the aftermath of suicide?

a. In what ways did this event influence your sense of professional identity as a school counselor of color?

7. How did you seek or receive support following the news of suicide in your school?

a. What types of support were available to you following the student's death? b. Do you feel that your identity as a counselor of color affected the kind of support you received or sought?

8. What coping strategies did you find most helpful in dealing with the aftermath of the student's suicide?

9. What are the expectations in your role as a school counselor when a crisis such as suicide happens in the school? a. Were there any additional or different expectations placed on you as a counselor of color during this crisis?

10. How do you feel about your ability to address student suicide in an educational setting?

a. Can you describe what would have helped you to feel better prepared to support students after death by suicide, if anything?

11. What training have you received as a counselor to help cope and deal with suicide?

a. What specialized training did you have that prepared you for working with staff and student body after the death of a student by suicide?

9. As a counselor of color, tell me about your experiences of workload and stress in the school system?

Closing Question

12. What lessons have you learned from this experience that you would share with other school counselors of color? 13. Is there anything that I have missed that you would like to add?

Appendix C: Demographic Questions

1. How long have you been a School Counselor?
2. Have you worked in elementary, middle, or high school settings?
3. How many student death by suicides have you dealt with in your career?

Appendix D: Email for Participation in Study

Thank you for interest in participating in my study about School Counselors of Color that have experienced student death by suicide. Please review the informed consent attached to this email. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at or call me at. If you agree with Informed Consent and participation in this study, reply with “I Consent” along with the time of your availability for Zoom interview. Once we have determined a time for the interview I will send you a Zoom link.